

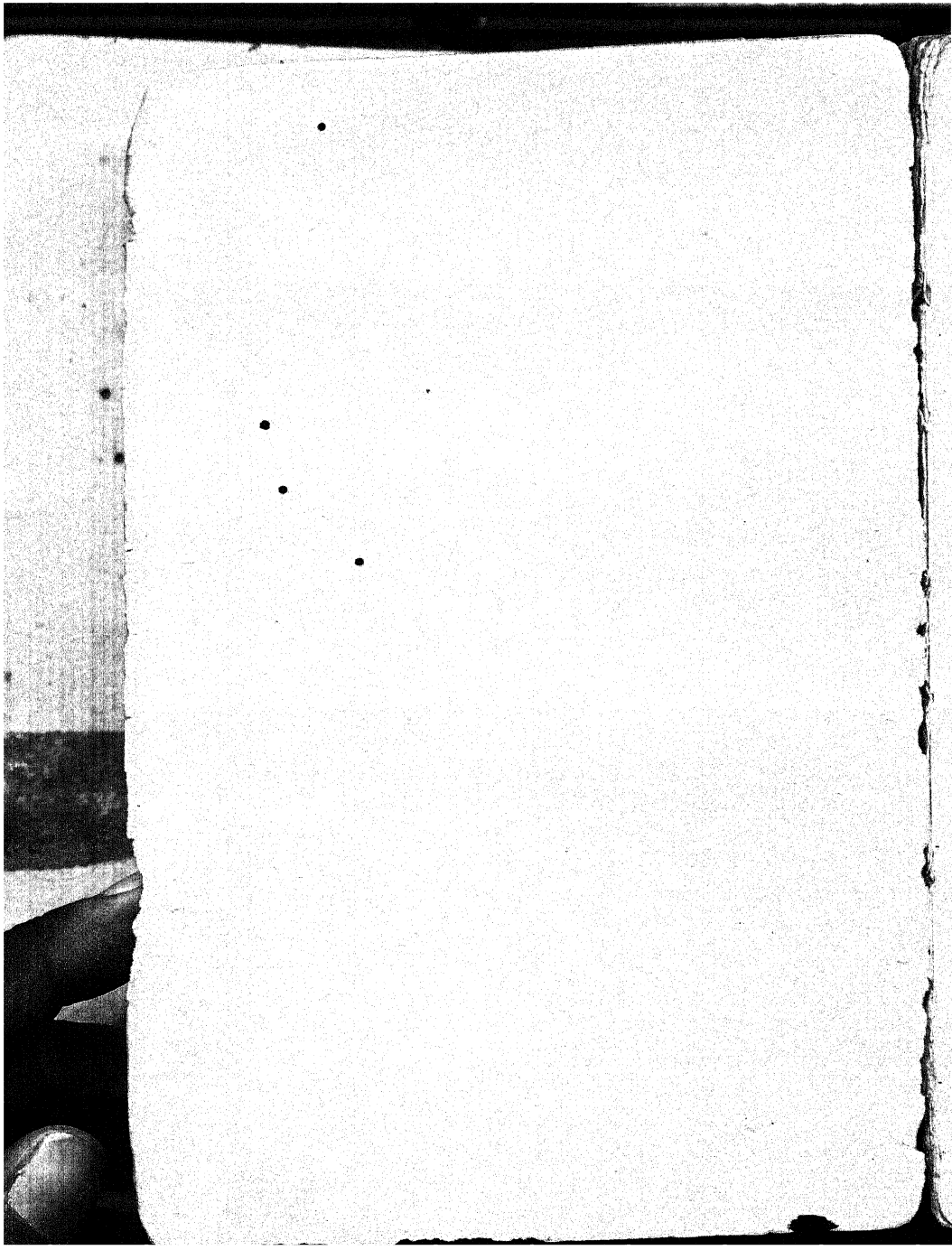
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IN DIFFERENT KEYS

HOME-COMING

I

THE Director of the Imperial German Opera Company was giving a grand public dinner. It was a grand dinner, because the season had been entirely successful and justified an extravagance; it was public, because of all the recognised methods of making success successful a public dinner, with complimentary toasts from the chief guests and a deprecatory return of thanks from the host, is at once the most profitable and the most enjoyable.

That the crowd which the Director had collected about the lavishly appointed table was a somewhat heterogeneous one only made the hope of a subsequent boom the more probable. There were men and women of all nationalities and conditions present, and all likely, for one reason or another, to carry the news of the event to the four corners of the earth. There were editors and "Art patrons"; there were social celebrities, grateful for this opportunity of becoming more celebrated, and equally grateful Nobodies; there were critics and wild-headed Kapell-

meister; and last, but not least, widely dispersed amongst these elements, the operatic Stars themselves, who, for reasons political and pacific, were better kept apart. Hence the lady of the light opera, whose break-neck runs and trills had been the season's wonder, was placed out of hearing of her rival, the sparkling if rotund little soubrette, who, in her turn, was five places removed from her bitterest enemy—the "youthful dramatic" department.

As for the Prima Donna, a massive person maliciously supposed to be desirous of singing Brünnhilde and Sieglinde in the same breath, and a perfect gunpowder cask of jealousy, temper, and all uncharitableness, she was seated next the Tenor, with whom, as yet, she had not entered into competition. Nevertheless, as the evening advanced there was an expression on her large face which indicated an increasing unwillingness to share the laurels with him. For the Tenor was the acknowledged lion, and she knew it, as did the Director, who, however, gloried in the fact. Every speech congratulating the "new Star on the operatic firmament" caused him to experience a glow of reflected triumph such as an astronomer might feel on his discovery of a new comet. The Tenor had made his—the Director's—fortune, and was now acting as his advertisement. At such a price the Director was content to drift gracefully into the background.

The Tenor himself sat at the Director's left hand and listened to the deluge of eulogy in three languages with moodily contracted brows. As far as could be

observed, he did not eat anything, nor did he appear to be particularly enjoying himself, and only when he had been repeatedly called upon did he reluctantly rise and stand before them, an almost gigantic figure, with a square, bull-dog face, small, deep-set eyes, and a bearing expressive of an uneasy truculence.

"How badly his clothes fit!" giggled the soubrette to her neighbour. The statement was spiteful, but it contained also the elements of a regrettable truth. The Tenor's evening-dress hung about him as though every bone and muscle in his body was in revolt; the immaculate shirt-front bulged like a turbulent white sea over his broad chest; equally immaculate cuffs hung over hands that suggested neither refinement nor artistic sensibility. They were brown, square-fingered, and might have belonged to a field-labourer.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began. Save that there was a faint "ch" about the "gentlemen," his accent was irreproachably correct and nasal. The Director stared at the tablecloth and coughed. He felt that the culminating paragraph of the advertisement was about to be reached, and showed therefore a becoming embarrassment.

"I have to thank you for your kindness to me, not only to-night but throughout the season," the speaker went on abruptly. "I am deeply grateful. At the same time I should like to take the opportunity to refute the many incorrect statements that have been made about me. It has been said that I am of German extraction. It is not true." He stopped, restlessly fingering the stem of his glass. "It is not

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true," he repeated. "I am an American citizen. I wish that to be clearly understood. It was in this country that I worked my way upwards, it was in this city that our respected Director accepted my services, it was in this city that I won your praises. In this country, therefore, I shall remain. It is the one means in my power of expressing my gratitude."

He hesitated as though about to say more, and then sat down with his head bowed. The Director, who had expected better things, smiled sourly, and the crowd, who, for the most part, cared nothing at all for gratitude or patriotism so long as they got their salaries, cheered vociferously. An excitable Frenchman started "The Star-Spangled Banner," and under cover of the consequent pandemonium the Prima Donna touched her neighbour on the arm.

"Is that really true what you have just said?" she asked. "I can hardly believe it. You speak German as they do in Munich."

"I have a talent for languages," he remarked grimly.

"I have heard it said that you were 'discovered' jodling, and that your parents are poor peasants in the south of Germany. Is that also a libel?"

"It is a lie!" he said. He threw out his chest. "My father was a Kentucky gentleman."

"Ah!" She laughed, not without malice. "One sees that you have other talents besides that for languages!"

"I can at least mind my own business," he retorted roughly.

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The Prima Donna tossed her head and turned her attention to her left-hand neighbour, with whom she kept up a lively conversation until the end of the banquet. When she then condescended to remember her partner she found his place empty. For the Tenor, being a tenor, had followed his own sweet will and had gone.

At the very moment when the Prima Donna had been prepared to wave the flag of truce, he was standing on the steps of the hotel, a cigar between his lips, his chapeau claque held awkwardly in one hand whilst the other was passed nervously through the thick hair.

"Gott sei Dank!" he repeated successively under his breath. "Gott sei Dank!"

It was past eleven o'clock, but the street was still alive with a hustling crowd of merrymakers. In a week Christmas would be upon them, and Christmas was already in the air, exhilarating the most sober, the most world-weary. Only the Tenor seemed unaffected. He hailed a passing cab, and, having given his home address, leant back against the cushions with closed eyes in an attitude of complacent weariness that was nevertheless vaguely, indescribably defiant. Something in the clenched hands, in the poise of the square head, seemed to express a constant challenge, a sullen, dogged refutation of an unseen accuser, which changed to active alarm as the grating of the cab-wheel against the kerb startled him from his dreams. Impatiently he sat upright and looked out for the cause of the stoppage, which the driver's

language quickly explained. In his eagerness to be quickly rid of his fare, the latter had become entangled in a short-cut thoroughfare of narrow dimensions at that moment blocked by a belated vegetable cart and a sleepy owner, who was replying to the Jehu's expostulations with true New York directness and simplicity. A single lighted window relieved the darkness of the closed stores on either hand of the narrow street, and a white placard with alternating red and black letters made the following announcement to the world in general:

"German Sausage and Sauerkraut to be had here!"

"Stop!" said the Tenor hastily. In the hot altercation then proceeding his command passed unnoticed. He did not repeat it. He waited until they had regained the fashionable thoroughfare, where he then dismissed the driver with the curt explanation that he preferred to go the rest of the way on foot. But when the cab was out of sight he pulled up his collar, drew his hat deeper over his eyes, and retraced his steps like a man about to commit a crime. A broad, yellow patch of light on the pavement told him that the little store was still open, and he entered stealthily, shamefacedly. Silence and a whiff of beer and tobacco greeted him. The long wooden tables, stained and littered with empty glasses, bespoke recent jubulations of a Teutonic type, but to all appearances the place was now deserted, and the Tenor advanced, scenting the atmosphere with luxurious content.

"Kellner!" he called, and then added quickly,

"Waiter!" But there was no answer to his appeal. Nevertheless, his searching eyes caught sight of a figure half extended on a table at the far end of the low-built room, and he drew nearer, reiterating his imperious "Waiter!" in some impatience. Within a few feet he stopped short, however, considering the picture before him like a man who finds himself suddenly confronted with the reality of a dream. The figure was that of a girl, and she was asleep. Her cheek rested upon the bare, outstretched arm, revealing in part a pretty young face, so round and childish that its intense pallor, the drooping of the mouth seemed imbued with a double pathos. But the Tenor did not look at her face; he looked at the quaint, picturesque costume, at the short dark skirt with the gaily embroidered apron, at the white bodice with the short puff sleeves, crossed at the bosom with a dainty silken kerchief, and something that was not unlike a gleam of pleasure relieved the sullen determination of his features. He touched her shoulder with his thick, short finger.

"Ei, ei, Fräulein!" he said softly.

She started to her feet almost before her eyes were open, and stood clinging to the back of her chair, still half intoxicated with sleep.

"Grüss Gott, Herr!" she said confusedly.

"Grüss Gott!" he returned. Then he cursed under his breath. "I disturbed you, I am afraid," he went on quickly, in English.

"I vas asleep," she explained naively. "I did not hear ze Herr enter, and it is so late——"

"Too late for me to get anything, I suppose?" he interrupted. "I happened to see that notice up there"—he jerked his head towards the window—"and I—I thought I'd like to try the stuff. But, of course, if it is too late——"

"Ach, no; it is not too late." She passed her hand over the thick braid of hair coiled about her head and turned wearily away. "If ze Herr vill sit down I vill bring him a plateful in a few minutes," she added.

The Tenor obeyed. He chose out a clean spot on the table for his hat, and threw back his shoulders with a sigh of content. For the first time his manner of truculent self-consciousness relaxed. He spread himself out with his two elbows on the table, and, with closed eyes, listened to the girl's footsteps as she passed busily to and fro. He heard her speaking, and then came the subdued clatter of plates, and a warm, rich odour drifted towards him. He opened his eyes. She was standing beside him, burdened with a steaming dish, which she placed before him with a gesture of pride.

"Ze Herr vill like it," she said. "I haf made it special good that he should come again."

"Yes, yes," he said hungrily. Then a shadow passed over his forehead. "And the beer?" he asked.

"Ach, ze beer!" She clapped her hands. "Ze Herr haf remembered it? Ach, it is no dream! Ze Herr is really Cherman?"

"I am an American," he retorted angrily; "but I am thirsty as well as hungry, and I understood that

beer is what one should drink with this stuff. That is all."

She made no answer, and he heard her cross the room, her steps grown suddenly slow and heavy. The Tenor paid no further heed to her. He attacked the food before him with morose vigour, scarcely glancing up when she placed the foaming glass beside his plate.

"It is ze best we haf," she said apologetically, "but it is not like ze Münchener."

"No, I suppose not," he answered. He took a long, deep draught, and his eyes fell on her face with its expression of grave wonder and surprise. "You look tired and hungry," he said quickly. "Fetch yourself a plate—there is enough for both of us. Sit down!"

She glanced nervously over her shoulder. "I dare not!" she whispered. "Ze boss would be so angry."

The Tenor burst into an abrupt laugh. The slang term had sounded quaintly ludicrous coming from her lips amidst the jumble of broken English, and she joined shyly in his amusement, not knowing its cause.

"I'll settle the boss," he assured her. "Do as I tell you!"

She obeyed then, seating herself at a respectful distance, and he piled her plate from his own with a rough good nature.

"Now eat!" he commanded.

There was a long silence. The Tenor drank to the bottom of his glass, and then clapped it down

before him with a sigh of satisfaction. In the short half-hour his whole being had undergone a peculiar change. There was an expansive geniality in his eyes as he gazed dreamily through the steam which curled up from the savoury dish before him, and when he caught her wondering, half-frightened look, he smiled.

"You have many guests here?" he asked.

"Ach, yes, Herr, many."

"Germans, I suppose?"

A sudden wave of colour rushed to her pale cheeks. She threw back her head with a movement of contempt.

"Zey call zemselves American, and do not understand me ven I speak zem in zeir own tongue," she said scornfully. "Zey are only Cherman in zeir beer and sausage; at odder times zey are nozing. Zey are like ze stray dogs which run where the food is richest. Zey are no true Chermans."

The Tenor turned his face away from the flame in her eyes.

"Yet you are German," he protested, "and you have left your fatherland."

"Ve vere so poor," she answered, under her breath, "and ze boss he offered me so much money if I would come and serve in his store. Die Mutterle vas so ill—it is not for myself; and von day I shall go home."

The Tenor took a cigar from his case and lit it. He smoked fast, and the fragrant clouds of tobacco hid his face.

"You are from south Germany?" he asked.

"Ach, yes. From Ober Bayern. You knew?"

"I guessed," he said hastily. "Your dress——"
He stopped.

"Yes, my dress. I must always wear it. It pleases the people. They think it pretty." She passed her hand lovingly over the embroidered apron. "Die Mutterle sent it me. And I am going to have a new one—for Christmas." She had stopped eating, with her plate still half full, and her large eyes were fixed ahead on a distance beyond the walls of the smoky little store. The Tenor did not look at her. His gaze was fixed attentively on the end of his cigar, and after a moment he cleared his throat.

"Tell me about your home," he said, "about your people. You can talk in your own language if you like, I shall understand you."

She rose and began to clear away.

"Ach, no, Herr. You would not understand. I talk as the south people talk. Even the north Germans cannot understand us."

"I tell you I shall understand," he repeated imperatively and almost roughly.

She stood with her arms akimbo, and again her eyes sought the same distant picture. Then suddenly she began to speak, half to herself, in a low, soft German, full of rich vowels and tender diminutives. She began to tell of a peasant's homestead in a far-off land, where the fir-covered mountains rise up to the blue skies side by side with the snow and rocks. She told of the warm, fragrant summers, of the work in the fields beneath the burning sunshine,

of the gay hay-gathering, and the first drear blast of the long, hard winter. She told of the hurricanes, of the nights spent by the fireside listening to the howl of the wind, and carving the wonderful things that should tempt the traveller in the summer. She told of the snows cutting off homestead from homestead in a white, silent solitude, and then of the first green heralds of spring, of the joyous festivities, of the songs——

"Ah, the songs!" the Tenor said, under his breath. "What do they know of such songs *here*?"

He spoke to himself, and she did not hear him. She had no eloquence at her command, but her short, broken sentences were like the strokes of a consummate artist. She told of her people, of her brother serving with the colours. She told of her sister who next year was to celebrate her Hochzeit with a neighbouring Grossbauer. She told of her father bowed with the weight of years, but fighting bravely on; she told of her mother, of the lined old face, of the clear eyes that had never lost their clearness, of a selfless, humble life. She told no more after that, and her voice died away into silence. The Tenor sat with his face buried in his hands. His cigar had gone out, and he seemed to be still listening to her. Suddenly he looked up.

"How pale you are!" he said unsteadily. "You are ill?"

"No, no!" She put her hand to her throat. "Only the air here suffocates me; and one longs for home—for the mountains——"

"Ah, yes, the mountains!" he echoed.

"And in a week it will be Christmas!"

For a long minute neither spoke. The Tenor's lips were compressed into a thin line, his eyes were fixed ahead.

"To-morrow Hans will come home on leave," she began again. "He will cut down the fir-tree, and one day soon they will bring it into the house—into the big guest-room. Die Mutterle will cover it with the pretty things we bought last year at the Fair—she will hang the gifts on the branches. There will be no one to help her now. And then, on Christmas Eve, they will all come, all our friends, and they will light the tree, and the room will be full of warm Tannenduft. They will sit at the long table, and they will remember me; they will drink my health—perhaps the Mutterle will cry a little—only a little, for she never cried much, not even when der liebe Herr Gott took her youngest from her. And then old Paul will come in with his violin, and they will sing—and dance—the Schuhplatt——"

She swayed, and the Tenor caught her and drew her gently down beside him.

"Don't!" he said. "Don't!"

She laid her head on the table, and her shoulders shook with the long, hard-drawn sobs. He listened to her with his big, coarse hand resting on her shoulder until the sounds grew quieter, ending at last in a shuddering sigh of exhaustion. Then he rose softly. He put a handful of silver on the table, and stumbled out into the darkness.

II

The Director was explaining to the Tenor the advantages of the contract which he had just laid before him.

"A three years' engagement in America at Caruso prices!" he said triumphantly. "What more do you want? Fortune just throws her good things at your head, my dear Mr Harridale. You wanted to stay in your native land"—his tone was here not altogether free from irony—"and there you are!"

"I'll see," said the Tenor evasively. He was pulling on his overcoat, and his manner was less brutally self-satisfied than of old. It was troubled to the point of nervousness, and the pale, heavy face led the Director to infer what he called "a night out."

"If you could see your way to signing at once——" he began.

"No, not now," the Tenor interrupted. "Perhaps to-morrow. I'll see."

"But——" began the Director, who was accustomed to people seeing things to their advantage at the first glance. But the Tenor had gone out of the room, leaving the Director to his reflections, which were of an exclamatory nature.

"And that man calls himself an American!" he said aloud.

Contrary to his custom, the Tenor pursued his way on foot. It was already evening, and a biting north wind swept round the corners in stormy gusts, but he noticed it as little as the gay crowd which eddied

around him, busy with the last day's shopping. For it was Christmas Eve. The Tenor appeared to have forgotten that fact, as well as the convivial evening which his colleagues had arranged in honour of the occasion. He turned down a dingy side street and strode on faster, like a man goaded by a frenzied impatience. The door of the little store was closed. He hesitated outside, listening to the clink of glasses and the confusion of rough voices with contracted brows. Then he pushed the door open and entered. A wave of thick tobacco smoke drifted towards him, and through the vapour he saw the long, filled tables, and the faces turned towards him in a momentary interest. But he looked in vain for the busy little figure in the quaint Bavarian dress. Instead, a man came towards him. He had a napkin thrown over his arm, and his bow was ponderously respectful.

"With vat may I serve you, sir?"

The Tenor started.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I came to speak to your little German girl. Where is she?"

"She is ill," the proprietor said.

"Ill?"

The man's fat face fell into lines of self-com-miseration.

"Yes; dat is my bad luck—always at the busiest times it happen. Yes, very ill. The doctor is with her now—up there." He jerked his thumb towards the ceiling. "He does not think she will get better."

"May I see her?" the Tenor asked impulsively.

"You are a relation, sir?"

"No, not a relation, but—a compatriot."

"Ach, so!" The man shrugged his shoulders. "Na, meinetwegen!" he said. He led the way behind the bar, up narrow, winding stairs, into a garret whose misery the sun had never brightened. A candle burnt by the poor bedside, and by its feeble light the Tenor saw her face against the pillow flushed with fever and sunken like that of an old and broken woman. Her eyes were closed, and she was speaking in the low monotonous tone of delirium.

"She go on like dat ze whole time," the proprietor said discontentedly. "But, there! You can talk to ze doctor yourself. I haf my work to do." He went out, banging the door after him.

The young man in the professional frockcoat, who had been seated thoughtfully in the shadow, arose as the Tenor approached. His face was grave with the first heavy responsibility.

"Mr Harridale!" he said, in a tone of surprised recognition.

"Yes; you know me?"

"I—I have heard you sing. Are you—perhaps——" he hesitated awkwardly.

"A relation?" The Tenor shook his head. "No, only a compatriot," he said. He seated himself on the edge of the bed and took the burning little hand, rough and work-worn as it was, in his. "She is very ill," he added.

"Yes, very ill—an exhausting fever which I can't break, do what I will. I can't get to the bottom of

it." The young doctor sighed impatiently. "There is something on her mind," he went on, "but I can't get to the bottom of that either. I don't understand her language. Perhaps, though, you could tell me. That brute downstairs wouldn't bother."

The Tenor made no answer. He listened with bent head, and in the shadowy little garret the silence was only broken by the steady, piteous murmur from the parched lips.

"She is talking of the mountains, of her people, of Christmas," the Tenor said at last, scarcely above his breath. "Sie stirbt an Heimweh."

"Heimweh?" the doctor echoed.

"Home-pain, home-longing." The Tenor lifted his head. "She is dying for her home," he went on, "and she left it to help her people. She sent them all her scanty wages."

The younger man smiled cynically.

"There aren't many of her sort that do that," he said. "Those who come to this country to make their fortunes keep their money to themselves. They have short memories for their home and people—most of them."

"Yes," said the Tenor, "but if they were here to-night—if they listened as you and I listen—they would remember—they would turn homewards——" He stopped short. The murmur ceased an instant, and the girl shifted her position with a moan of pain. Outside they heard the crack of an exploding fire-work, and beneath them the thud of glasses on the wooden tables. The Tenor looked up.

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"It is Christmas Eve!" he said, as though awaking from a dream.

The other nodded.

"Yes, Christmas Eve," he said.

The Tenor rose. A sudden change had come over him. His bearing was erect, determined, almost gay.

"Will you help me?" he said. "Will you wait here till I come back? I shan't be long—an hour at most."

The doctor considered his watch dolefully.

"Christmas Eve!" he repeated.

"Surely a good time to bring another life and happiness!" the Tenor answered.

The doctor put his watch back in his pocket.

"Right!" he said. "I'll wait."

The candle spluttered dismally and, after a last feeble struggle, sank to a fading spark against the darkness. The doctor, who had been dreaming with his head between his hands, lulled by the monotonous voice beside him, looked up. The dying point of light reminded him of another light that was slowly going out, and he drew anxiously nearer. The hand lying powerless on the ragged quilt burnt him, and it was with inexpressible relief that he heard heavy steps on the stairs outside.

"It's time he came," he muttered aloud.

The door opened, and for a moment he stood motionless, dazzled by the sudden flood of light from the raised lamp. Then he uttered an exclamation. It was a peasant who stood in the open doorway—a broad-shouldered Bavarian peasant such as he had

seen in pictures—dressed in the costume of his kind, with the short, leather breeches, the bare knees, the jaunty cap set at the back of the square, bull-dog head.

"Mr Harridale!" the doctor stammered.

"That's not my name—now," the Tenor said quietly; "but it's of no consequence. Take the lamp, will you?"

The doctor obeyed, and without another word his companion bent over the unconscious girl and lifted her in his arms.

"Are you stark, staring mad?" the doctor protested. "She is dying!"

The Tenor smiled gravely.

"Perhaps those who have suffered know best," he said. "I have suffered as she does—through my own folly. I know the cure."

He led the way with his frail burden, and the doctor followed like a man hypnotised. They passed down the narrow, creaking stairs into a room beneath the one they had just left. It was an ugly little parlour, with glass cases of stuffed birds and stuffy plush furniture, and a battered-looking piano. But a tall fir-tree rose majestically to the ceiling.

The doctor whistled.

"I brought it myself," the Tenor said. "I paid ten dollars for it. The people were like you—they thought I was mad." He laid his burden gently on the sofa. Since he had held her in his arms she had ceased moaning, and now she lay quiet like an exhausted child. "There are candles on the table," he went

on. "We must stick them up as fast as we can—before she wakes. Here are the matches."

"She will never wake," the doctor muttered, but he obeyed, still under the spell of a will so sure of its own purpose, and for ten minutes the two men worked feverishly at their task. Point by point the dark green branches of the tree became the bearers of the tiny flames till it seemed as though a halo of light rose from the tree itself, brightening with every instant till the whole dingy room became resplendent with the new glory. The Tenor drew back, his arms akimbo. The glow was on his face, changing and softening it.

"It's Christmas!" he said huskily. "It's Christmas. They are lighting up on the mountain-side——" He broke off a branch and let it burn in the flame of a candle. It crackled cheerily, and a rich, warm perfume rose and filled the air with its forest fragrance. "How good it smells!" he said. He went to the couch and, kneeling down, put the charred branch to the girl's nostrils. "Riech doch, Mädel!" he whispered. "Riech doch! Es ist Tannenduft!"

For a long minute there was no movement. The light from the candles flickered on to the unconscious face, forming quaint, deceptive shadows about the haggard features. Then the two men heard the sound of a long-drawn sigh; the heavy eyelids quivered and opened; the eyes, still dim with the film of death, rested on the Tenor's face.

"Where am I?" she whispered, in a dry, faint voice. "Who are you?"

"I'm from the Bavarian Highlands," he answered gaily. "I'm from the village next your own, and I'm going to take you back to your people—to my people——" His voice fell. "Ach, Mädel! we are going home together—back to the mountains——"

She saw his dress. Her eyes, clearing with magic swiftness, passed his kneeling figure to the glory behind him, and a cry broke from her parched lips:

"Der Tannenbaum!" she whispered. "Der Tannenbaum!"

"Yes, yes," he answered. "It's Christmas—Christmas Eve. Don't you hear them? They are drinking our healths! Now old Paul is tuning his violin—they are going to dance the Schuhplatt! Ach! I was a good man at it in my day, and shall be again." He jodled softly but triumphantly. "It was thus that I found my voice. Yes, and there will be songs sung as they join hands about the tree—the old songs—do you remember?"

He pushed the protesting doctor on one side and seated himself at the piano. His hands drew richer chords from the old tinkling instrument than it had ever heard before, and he sang. He used the whole beauty of a voice which had made him famous, but it was no operatic air which filled the stillness. He sang the songs of Old Germany—Volkslieder, such as haunt the mountain-side—tender, plaintive melodies, and words whose poetry has been drawn from the heart of a whole people. To the two motionless listeners it seemed as though the music mingled with the perfume of the fir-tree, as though

the lights burnt more brightly and the branches bent in grave thanksgiving.

“O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, wie grün sind deine Blätter!”

Down below in the noisy beer saloon there was a stillness of death.

“Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht——”

The Tenor's voice died away into silence. He rose softly.

The girl had fallen back among the cushions. Her eyes were closed, a smile parted the white lips.

“She is asleep,” the doctor whispered. “The fever is broken.”

The Tenor knelt down by the couch. He buried his face in his hands.

The Christmas bells rang out over the great city.

THE LONG ARM

THE road from the village of the Hirsch wound round the mountain side between shadowy fir and pine up to the Grosse Hirschsprung, where the gaunt, uncovered rocks towered above the trees like grim giants watching over the valley beneath. In the summer busy sight-seers toiled their way upwards, but now the time of silence and loneliness had come, and only the bells of a solitary sleigh broke the intense melancholy quiet. Thick freshly fallen snow lay upon mountain and valley, but at the side of the road, beneath the heavily laden branches of the young fir trees, there were traces of human steps, blurred and irregular as though someone, overcome with exhaustion, had stumbled from stem to stem.

The old peasant pacing beside the two steaming horses followed the footprints with an interest which deepened as they left the valley farther behind them. Now and again he glanced back at his loaded sleigh and called to his team warningly at the more dangerous curves; but when his attention was no more required and the excited tinkle of the bells had subsided to a peaceful rhythm, his eyes wandered back to the

curious traces and followed them ahead through the dazzling whiteness. Suddenly, with a soft click of the tongue, he brought the two weary horses to a standstill and looked about him. The footprints had ended in a dark, black patch as though the wanderer had fallen and dragged himself over the snow-filled ditch into the depths of the forest.

"Grüss Gott, Frau!" he called. His thin voice echoed through the stillness, but no answer came. The crouching woman's figure, half hidden by the overhanging branches, stirred, and an ashy face, pinched with cold and hunger, lifted itself. A pair of dark eyes opened an instant and then closed again. The driver crossed the ditch and caught her by the shoulders, shaking her to and fro with a feeble excitement.

"Um Gottes Willen, Mariele!" he exclaimed. "What doest here? Art half dead—in another minute if I had not come——"

"I should have been asleep," she concluded listlessly. "Then it would have been better with me."

"And thy little one there?"

She started and bent down over the little bundle at her feet. A feeble cry answered her touch, and with a movement of passionate despair she clasped the half-frozen child to her breast, covering it with her shawl, and kissing the blue lips as though striving to impart her own last life and warmth into the frail body.

"Better for him also!" she said under her breath.

The man beside her laughed shortly and roughly.

"Ach was!" he said. Without another word he half dragged, half carried her over the snow, and in spite of her feeble efforts at resistance placed her and the child on his sleigh. "One cannot leave thee to die in the snow," he grumbled. "Whither wert thou bound, Mariele?"

"Home!" she answered, and again her voice rang compressed and bitter as though the word were a curse.

"Home? To the Holz-Hof—to thy people?"

"I have none other."

"None?"

"The other—is to be sold over our heads—to-morrow."

He made no answer. He cracked his whip, and the sleigh jerked forward, crunching and grinding over the frozen snow. For some minutes he trudged silently at her side, his head bowed against the sharp north wind which had begun to sigh down the cutting. Then he glanced up at her.

"'Tis three years since I last saw thee, Mariele," he said. "What has happened to thee in the time?"

She met his shifty, deep-set eyes with an irrepressible shudder.

"Thou knowest as well as I," she said. "It was thou who helped to ruin my husband. It is thou who art killing him."

"Killing him?"

"They say he is very ill—dying, perhaps."

"Where?"

"In prison." Her voice deepened and vibrated

with a sudden passion. "Why did they not kill him outright? If he had done what they said, then he deserved death. That would have been just. But to suffer a living death and yet be innocent——"

"Innocent!" the old man interrupted roughly. "The whole world knows that he was guilty. There was no man in the village who needed money as he needed it. And did I not see him slink away from old Thoma's house on the night of the murder? And did I not find thy Sepp's knife close to old Thoma's body?"

She bent forward, her eyes blazing.

"You lied!" she cried fiercely. "You lied!"

"I told the truth!"

"The knife was not Sepp's——"

"Whose, then?"

"The Michal's—my brother's."

He laughed and pulled his round fur cap deeper over his eyes.

"Why didst thou not speak up, then?"

"I did—no one heeded me. There were others—who lied."

He met her piercing gaze for an instant and then looked away.

"Hast lost thy senses, Mädel," he mumbled.

"The Michal was already gone—out of the country. How could it have been he?"

"*Thou* knowest!" she answered with passionate emphasis. Suddenly she leant forward. He was walking close beside her, and she caught him by the shoulder and held him in a grip which made him

finch. "Old Peter," she said, "hast no pity? My man is dying—my Sepp, my husband. He never harmed you or any man. Wilt thou have innocent blood on thy hands?"

He wrenched himself free with a smothered exclamation.

"I told the truth!" he said. "I'll not go back upon it!"

She sank together as though he had struck her. Only the smouldering fire still glimmered in her eyes.

"May God have no mercy upon thee!" she said under her breath.

He seemed not to hear. They had reached a turning where a second road, rising from the left, joined them, and his crooked finger pointed to the traces of sleigh-runners through the fresh snow.

"Be there guests up at the Holz-Hof?" he asked, as though nothing had passed between them.

"I know not—it may be," she answered.

He cracked his whip; the two sturdy horses swerved round to the steep incline with a cheery jingle of bells, and the next moment the sleigh had glided into a clearing and up to the steps of a low-built Black Forest house which stood like a dark stain against the snow-covered mountain side. Maria Hauger made no attempt to move. She sat with her sleeping child pressed close against her whilst old Peter went up the narrow wooden steps and thumped vigorously at the door, stamping the snow from his boots and cursing at the delay. The light which already burnt in one of the tiny windows beneath

the overhanging eaves shifted; a door creaked on its hinges, and a querulous woman's voice called through the aperture.

"It is I—old Peter," he answered roughly; and then, in a sharp undertone: "Hab' Acht! the Mariele is there!"

The door opened wider, and old Peter passed inside after giving a quick glance at the woman huddled together in the sleigh. She seemed asleep, or too frozen to move; but her eyes were open, and when he had disappeared she dragged herself upright, looking about her as though seeking old landmarks. The clearing before the Hof was deserted. An empty barn, a few overturned hives, loads of rotting pine-wood—everywhere the signs of past wealth and present ruin, and over everything white, untouched snow and a brooding spirit of desolation. A cold blast of wind laden with snow blew against Maria Hauger's face. Painfully and wearily she crawled down from her place among the logs and went up the steps. The door stood ajar, she hesitated, and then—as her child moaned—she pushed it softly open and entered. The low-ceilinged room was in half darkness. A candle burnt on the rough table, throwing gloomy shadows into the distant corners, and cutting into sharp relief the three faces bent together over something which glistened and sparkled in the dim light.

"Not enough!" old Peter said. "Not enough! It is not what thou promised me. A bargain is a bargain."

"It is all we have!" The words came from the woman next him. Her voice quavered with a weakness strangely in contrast to the face and the bony, muscular hand that played with the go'd upon the table. Even in the toothless jaws there was a kind of strength, and in the weak old eyes, deep-sunken beneath the furrowed brows, there was yet a latent, determined energy.

Old Peter shook his head.

"It is not enough," he repeated obstinately. "Not enough. I must have my bargain."

"You have ruined us. Is that not enough?"

"A bargain is a bargain. For less than my bargain I would not have held my peace. As it is"—he passed his hand over his shifty eyes—"I am right sorry for the Mädel out there——" He broke off. The old man, who, during this short colloquy had stood opposite the door staring sightlessly before him, uttered a short, hysterical scream, and with a movement like that of a startled animal, his wife sprang upright, her eyes following his pointing finger, her thin, twisted lips parted in a breathless alarm.

"Mariele!" she exclaimed.

"Ja, Mütterle, it is I."

All three stared at her in a curious, tense silence. She stood in the shadow, her eyes fixed on the table, and instinctively the old man's hand fell on the gold and covered it.

"What dost thou want?"

"I come for help. To-morrow they will sell our Hof and all we have. We are starving."

The toothless jaws snapped together. The moment's fear had gone out of the eyes, which had become black and beady.

"We cannot help thee. We have nothing."

The Mariele put her child gently to the ground. It clung to her skirts, dazed with cold and weariness, a pitiful little figure enough. But the hard old face opposite did not relax nor the eyes soften.

"Thou hast money there," the Mariele said. "Give me a little—only a little, Mütterle! Um Gottes Willen——" She had taken a step forward, one hand outstretched in piteous pleading. "Mütterle, canst not refuse me. 'Tis the first time I have asked aught of thee. When the Sepp came and took me thou gavest me nothing—not even thy blessing—though he had the right to ask more than that of thee. No other man would have taken me as he did—without gold or cattle. And in all these four hard years I have fought it out alone. Now I am broken. There is no more work for me. We are starving—my Büberle and I."

Breathless, incoherent, she had reached the table. But the old woman had drawn back in measure as she had advanced, and there was a malignant cruelty in the compressed lips.

"Go to thy husband—he will help thee!"

"Mütterle! Thou knowest—my husband is in prison, perhaps dying!"

"It is well—the murderer!"

Old Peter nodded.

"Ei, ei, it is God's justice," he said. "A life for a

life—that is the law, Mädel.” He chuckled to himself, gathering together the gold and dropping it carefully into a canvas bag. “A life for a life!” he repeated with a curious satisfaction as though the phrase pleased him. “And to-morrow I will come for the rest, Nachbar Hölzle, otherwise——” He did not finish his sentence, but shuffled clumsily towards the door. He came no farther. The Mariele barred his path. With one arm she held her child close to her, with the other she caught him and thrust him roughly back.

“Stop!” she said. “Mütterle, why hast thou given him this money?”

“What is that to thee?”

“Is it—silence money, Mütterle?”

Mother and daughter faced each other in electric silence, eye to eye, motionless, rigid, the one upright and accusatory, the other bowed, the shoulders hunched together as though beneath a heavy burden, but resolute, stubborn, and defiant.

“Is it silence money?” she repeated loudly.

The old man had gone back to the fireplace, and was sitting huddled together before the blaze. He turned his head now and looked at the Peter, who stood where the Mariele had thrust him, grimacing with his ugly, twisted mouth. There was something terrified yet cruel and cunning in the glance. She saw it, and the red blood mounted her ashy cheeks.

“Väterle, thou *knowest!*” she burst out. “Thou hast always known! Thou hast always known that it was not my Sepp. Thou knowest who it was

who killed old Thoma—and thou and this man have kept silence—have let my man rot in prison, have let the disgrace and ruin fall upon his wife and child!”

Old Peter jerked his head deprecatingly. The woman by the table never flinched nor moved. Her face was set as though it had been moulded in bronze. Suddenly the Mariele stumbled forward. She dropped on her knees before the bowed figure, clinging to the cold, unresponsive hand, tears of anguish rolling down the thin cheeks.

“Ach, Mütterle, have pity! See, I too am thy child! This little one is also of thy blood! Wilt thou cast us both out into misery for ever? Thou knowest the truth! Speak now; save my husband, my Sepp—now, before it is too late! Give me back my happiness! The Michal is safe—far beyond the reach of this bad man. Ach, Mütterle, my heart is breaking! As thou hopest for mercy, have mercy upon me!”

Still no answer. A gust of wind blowing round the corners of the house bore to their ears the distant jingle of sleigh bells, but no one heeded. Slowly but irresistibly the old woman freed herself from the desperate clutch.

“Be gone, out of our house, and let me never see thee again!” she said distinctly.

The Mariele rose to her feet. Her face was livid, and the tears had dried as though they had fallen on burning stone. Without a word she went to the door. There she turned and looked back at the three

watchers. Her eyes, wide open in an almost delirious passion, rested an instant on each of the sullen faces, then she lifted her bare arm, her two fingers extended.

"Then may the curse of God be on you all!" she said. "And may the long arm of the Lord fall upon you this night and on him thou shieldest! Amen."

The next moment she was gone. Through the open door they heard her running footsteps over the hard snow and the cheery ring of bells. Old Peter drew his cap deeper over his eyes.

"Ei, the curse of God!" he chuckled. "That's a heavy thing, Nachbar. One must make it worth a man's while——" His small eyes snapped maliciously. "To-morrow I shall come for the rest—otherwise the curse will be too heavy for me."

A spasm of pain passed over the old woman's face.

"Old Peter, thou must have patience. We have sold our last cow to pay thee. We have no more."

"To-morrow I shall come for the rest," he repeated. "If not, I shall tell who it was I saw on that night, and whose knife——"

"Be silent!" she broke out fiercely. "Be silent, you——"

Her eyes were fixed on the open doorway. Old Peter turned with a start of alarm. A tall, bearded man stood on the threshold, hat in hand, looking from one to the other. The dusk had already fallen, and the grey background threw into sharp relief the broad shoulders and massive head. But they could see nothing of his face, which was in shadow.

"Guten Abend, Leute!" he said. "Might I ask if this is the Holz-Hof?"

"Jawohl, it is the Holz-Hof."

As usual it was the woman who had answered. She had recovered her composure and stood measuring the stranger with narrowed, short-sighted eyes.

"Would it be possible to obtain a night's lodging here?"

"No, this is not a Gasthaus."

"So my driver told me; but there is a storm getting up, and I am ready to pay for your hospitality."

As he spoke a blast of icy wind swept through the open doorway, lifting a whirl of loose snow in the yard outside. The stranger came farther into the room. They saw then that he wore a heavy fur mantle, and on the one ungloved hand a diamond sparkled in the feeble light.

"Come!" he said persuasively. "You would not turn a stranger out on such a night! I have already sent my driver back to the village, hoping to find horses here which will take me on to my destination to-morrow."

The old woman laughed bitterly, and her eyes fell on Peter, who stood shuffling on the doorstep.

"We have no horses," she said.

"But at least a bed—a room in which I could spend the night?" He took a thick pocket-book from the breast of his coat and drew out a roll of paper-money. "If I might prove my honesty in advance," he suggested cheerily. He had a curiously low voice, and

there was something nasal and foreign in his speech which caught her attention.

"You are no German, Herr?" she asked sharply.

"No, an American—a complete stranger and at your mercy!"

She was not looking at him now, but at the pocket-book which he had flung carelessly on the table. The old man had also turned, and their eyes met.

"You can stay and share the little we have," she said roughly. She picked up the candle and hobbled to a side door, holding the light above her head so that he could see the narrow wooden staircase which led upwards into the shadows. "There is a room up there," she said. "You can have it for to-night. It was my son's."

For the first time her voice changed. It was as though a ray of warmth and sunlight had fallen into the sombre room. The stranger followed her, and for a few minutes the two old men were alone. Peter shuffled back to the table and played with the pocket-book with greedy, nervous fingers.

"Fat—fat," he mumbled. "If that was thine, eh, Nachbar?"

The old man by the fireplace raised his clenched fist.

"Let be!" he cried fiercely. "We are honest folk!"

A rancorous chuckle answered him.

"Oh, ei, honest, very honest! Well, Na, till to-morrow! Then we shall know who is honest. Ade!"

The door slammed to, shutting out the last glimmer of daylight. The old man waited until the sleigh bells died in the distance, then he rose and crept towards the table. He could see nothing, but his hand glided over the pocket-book, and held it for a moment in a ravenous clutch. Steps sounded on the creaking stairs. He shrank back, and the next instant his wife stood in the room. She held the candle in one shaking hand, and the wavering light shone upwards into a face which in its excess of emotion had become almost young.

"Seth," she whispered. "Is he gone?"

"Who? The Peter? Yes."

She drew closer to him.

"Think! The stranger knows our Michal. He has come from him—he has a message for us!"

"Herr Gott!" He clung to her, his lips trembling like a child's. "Herr Gott—from Michal—our Michal? Where is he? Ach, du lieber Gott——"

He stopped. The American had come down the stairs and was standing in the shadow looking at him.

"Yes, I know your son," he said in the same low, uncertain fashion. "I met him out there—West—and he told me to look you up." He fumbled at his dark beard. "It seems he was in some sort of trouble when he left. Was it so?"

Neither answered for a moment. A cunning, distrustful look had come into the woman's eyes.

"Trouble?" she echoed.

"Yes—robbery and—and murder."

She laughed contemptuously.

"Ach, you mean the old Thoma? Bah, his murderer is in prison."

"His murderer?"

"Jawohl, the Sepp Hauger. They caught him at once."

The hand at the beard dropped.

"Ah!" The sound came almost like a sigh of relief. "Then it would be safe for your son to come home? There is no suspicion attached to him. I mean—he seemed afraid——"

"Old Peter knows," he interrupted sharply. "So long as Peter lives it is not safe. He must keep away. If old Peter died, or if——"

She stopped short, conscious that she betrayed herself; but he seemed to have noticed nothing. He drew back deeper into the shadow.

"I will tell him," he said thickly. "He had a sort of longing after you—and the old place. He told me to tell you—he was doing well, and to give you his love."

"You are his friend?"

He laughed shortly.

"Not much. We never did each other any good, he and I. But he asked me to give you his message, and I have given it. Good night! Please wake me early. I must be off by daybreak."

She laid her trembling hand on his arm.

"Stranger—have you nothing else from him?"

He looked down at her and seemed to hesitate.

"No—nothing."

"But you will see him again?"

"Perhaps."

"Tell him that we are keeping the old place for him—that one day he must come back to us."

"I will tell him." He picked up the pocket-book and fingered the notes. One he took out and placed on the table. As he did so the diamond sparkled like an eye of fire.

"That's for your hospitality," he said. "Good night!"

He went to the bottom of the stairs and stood there an instant looking back into the gloomy room. His eyes seemed to rest on each object and to linger there with a curious intensity as though he were trying to impress an indelible picture upon his memory.

"Good night!" he repeated.

"Gute Ruh'!" she answered.

The door leading to the staircase closed. They heard his heavy steps overhead, the sound of a chair being dragged over the uncarpeted floor, and then, after a time—silence. The old man went back to the fire and poked it to a blaze. The flames cast a lurid reflection on his face. There were tears on the sunken cheeks.

"Unser Michal!" he mumbled.

"Unser Michal—ach, Gott!" He crouched down on the stool, and held his head between his hands. Outside the wind had risen to a hurricane which howled savagely down the mountain pass and rattled against the windows with its frozen breath. The

woman took her place on the opposite side of the hearth and stared sombrely before her.

"Unser Michal!" she echoed, and a strange tenderness vibrated in her harsh voice. "'Tis five years since he went away, and we shall never see his face again!"

"Never!"

She leant forward, and her hand rested on his arm.

"Didst hear what that man said? He longed for us and his home. Ei, that is natural. It is his home—it has been the home of his fathers generation after generation. One day he will come back to his own; he must!"

"There will be no home for him then." The old man's voice rose to a smothered wail. "To-morrow old Peter will come, and we shall have to give him house and Hof. We shall have no home more." There was a moment's silence, and then he went on quaveringly. "What if Peter told the truth? Michal is safe. Mariele's man would be set free; she would take her curse from us. 'The long arm of the Lord——'" He stopped short, shivering as though with inward cold. The hold upon his arm tightened.

"Art afraid of a curse? Should we give our son price, our flesh and blood? Dost thou know what that would mean? Michal could never come home—never see our face again. The shame would be upon our name for ever."

He nodded, his hands clenched upon his knees.

"Ei, ei, we must buy old Peter—somehow. Perhaps the stranger would help us."

Their eyes met an instant.

"Why should he? Did he not say he was no friend of Michal's? Perhaps he is an enemy—perhaps he has come to spy. Didst not see how he looked at us? He knows now that it *was* Michal. If he went to-morrow and told——"

"He must not! We must stop him."

"How? He is not to be bought, like Peter."

"No, not to be bought."

A long silence. Overhead there was no movement. Save for the wind a death-like quiet surrounded them. The fire sank lower, and the reflection on the two wizened faces deepened to a dull scarlet.

"Didst see the ring upon his finger?" she whispered suddenly.

He nodded.

"Ei, it sparkled so."

"And the book? It was full of money. Didst see?"

"I felt. It was thick—thick as my hand."

"If it were ours, we could buy old Peter."

"We could keep the Hof," he mumbled.

"And Michal could come home—Michal, our son."

Her voice shook with the same tenderness. But the mouth was hard. The eyes underneath the overhanging brows were alight; the thin knotted fingers twisted themselves into the folds of her rough dress as though into the throat of some venomous serpent.

"What is the stranger to us?" she whispered.

This time they looked at each other long and steadfastly, but neither spoke. Outside the wind

roared; a cloud of driving snow swept past the window like a phantom, and the pine trees creaked and strained in the force of the gale. An hour passed. Then a second time their eyes met. The old man nodded. It was as though he had answered a question which she had been repeating over and over again, and she rose and went to the table. There was the sound of a drawer being softly opened. She came back and thrust something which glittered into his outstretched hand.

"Hast thou fear?"

"No." His lips were trembling, but gradually as she looked at him they steadied and closed firmly. "No," he repeated. He stumbled to his feet, and followed her softly across the room. The door opened noiselessly. They crept up the stairs, she leading, the candle sheltered behind her hand so that only a faint, uncertain light relieved the thick darkness. Once the man behind her stumbled and she stopped, listening, but the noise seemed to pass unnoticed. The whole house shook and trembled in the teeth of the tempest, and she went on resolutely. At the top of the stairs the door stood ajar, and a thin ray of light filtered through on to the upturned faces. The man's jaw dropped.

"He is awake!"

The whisper sounded loud on the narrow staircase. With a firm hand she pushed the door wider open. The stranger sat at the table where the candle burnt. His back was turned towards them, but they saw that his face was buried in his arms and that he slept.

The fur-lined coat had been flung carelessly over the rough bed, the pocket-book lay on the table, and a few loose notes fluttered unsteadily in the draught. Outside there was a sudden, startling lull in the storm.

"Quick!" she whispered.

He shuffled past her. The candle which she held in her raised hand threw his shadow on to the opposite wall, and as he crouched with the short brutal knife lifted to his shoulder it was as though a black silent devil followed him, mocking every movement with hideous exactitude.

Downstairs the Black Forest clock called the hour. The stranger stirred and lifted his head, as though listening to some old familiar sound.

"Quick!" she repeated aloud.

The old man sprang over the short space that divided them, and with a mad senile force drove the knife between the bowed shoulders. A cry of anguish broke upon the strange stillness. The stranger stumbled to his feet, swung round and faced them. His eyes were wide open and full of an awful mixture of horror and stupor.

"Mütter——!" he screamed.

Then silence and darkness. He had fallen back over the table, crashing the candle to the ground; and in the same instant the storm, regaining its fury, had swept through the house, blowing out the light with its icy breath.

The woman groped forward through the inky darkness.

"Where are the matches?" she whispered.

"Here, I have them." His voice shook like a child's. "Herr Gott, did you hear him scream?"

"Yes, yes; don't be a fool! Be quick!"

He struck a match. The first sputtered and went out. The second flickered, and then burnt up straight and steady. The light fell upon the bloody hand that held it and upon the Thing lying across the table—a white, upturned face.

Outside the shriek of the wind ended in a roaring, rending crack, as though the earth had been torn asunder. It drowned every other sound. Afterwards there was again silence—absolute, death-like.

As the dawn broke over the drear world of snow a little crowd of villagers, bearing the motionless body of the old Peter between them, clamoured at the door of the Holz-Hof. The Mariele was amongst them, and her face as she listened to those about her was filled with mingled joy and pity.

"They found him at the bottom of the drift," one man explained excitedly to her. "A falling tree had struck him and held him pinned down all night, but he lived long enough to make his confession, the villain! Lucky for thee and thy Sepp, Mariele! They will set him free now, and the good Michal had better look to himself if he shows his face again in these parts. Why don't they open the door?"

In spite of the repeated calls and knocks the door of the Holz-Hof remained closed. One man set his

shoulder impatiently against the frail lock and burst it open. But inside all was quiet and silence.

"Hi, Du, Mariele!" he shouted. "They are asleep. Thou hadst better go in and wake them. It is thy place."

She pushed her way through the little crowd, and entered the dwelling-room. No sign of life. The door to the staircase stood open, and obeying some instinctive premonition she ran to the foot, calling aloud:

"Mütterle! Mütterle!"

A heavy silence answered. It frightened her. She beckoned one of the villagers, and together they mounted the steep steps. At the top the door stood partly open, shivering in the draught. She pushed it open, and then a piercing scream reached those who waited below. The more daring followed, but as they reached the threshold they recoiled, crossing themselves and muttering broken, disjointed prayers.

The grey morning light filtered through the uncurtained window; from the rafters, like some awful pendulum, a long dark shadow swung in slow, decreasing circles; two chairs had been violently overturned. The old Hölzle sat on the disordered bed, laughing and whimpering, and on the table, thrown backwards, lay the body of a man in the prime of life, clean-shaven, the hard, cruel mouth parted in a piteous childish terror. A false beard and wig, torn off in the death-struggle, lay on the floor, and in one outstretched hand he held a piece of paper on which the words "To my mother" were

plainly visible. Rolls of paper money lay scattered over the room. Some of it was stained in the dark slow stream which oozed across the table, and some of it had come into the old man's hands. He played with it greedily, and when they cut down the poor, stiffening body he laughed and nodded.

"It was the long arm," he whispered. "The long arm—the long arm——"

THE HOUR'S MADNESS

I

NORA MUNRO stood on the threshold of the great, sombre room, and looked about her. Everything was familiar to her; the massive bedstead, the thick carpets which deadened the heaviest footstep, the old-fashioned odds and ends, the sunless windows looking out on to the sunless windows opposite—all these features were as well known to her as her own life, and yet she saw them now in a different light—the light of a great change. She felt as she stood there as though the black dress she wore smothered the last spark of exuberant youth which, a few days before, had been hers, and the words of the cut-and-dried little lawyer downstairs echoed in her ears crushingly final.

“Nothing left, Miss Munro, nothing—not a penny-piece!”

She had nodded as though she had understood, but in reality she only grasped his full meaning now as she looked from one to the other of the old precious possessions which were now to become strangers. It was as though she were taking a silent farewell of them and of happiness itself.

Suddenly the slim figure lying in the shadow of the great four-posted bedstead stirred, and she came quickly forward, the grief on her girl's face changing to an expression of quiet resolution.

"David!" she whispered; "David, dear!"

The boy lifted himself on his elbow, and passed his hand dazedly across his eyes. In the dim light his extreme pallor seemed almost death-like,* the brightness of the eyes feverish and unnatural.

"Oh, I am so glad you have come," he said in a thin, faint voice. "I have had such bad dreams, Nora. I don't know what it is—ever since father died the place seems haunted. Every time I fall asleep I dream that some evil is pursuing us—and then I wake up, hot and cold with fear——" He fell back among the pillows coughing. "Nora, can't we get away from here—out of London, out of England, somewhere far away from the old associations, in another atmosphere? Then I believe I should get well and strong again. Dr Rayner said so."

"Dr Rayner!" she repeated. She seated herself on the edge of his bed and took his thin wasted hand in her own. A painful flush had disturbed the clear transparency of her complexion, and the premature expression of anxiety on the girlish features seemed to deepen. "When was he here?" she asked.

"An hour ago, whilst you were with that lawyer fellow. He wanted to see you very badly—I don't know why."

She made no answer, but sat gazing thoughtfully before her.

"He's awfully good to me," the boy went on after a moment. "He said I was to tell you that I must go away. I want to so. We can, can't we, Nora?"

She started and searched the eager, upturned face as though she had suddenly become afraid.

"Yes, dear," she said faintly. "Yes, dear, of course!"

Before those pleading eyes she had not the strength to tell him the truth. She got up restlessly and went to the window, looking out on to the dreary street with contracted brows. There had been a bitter irony in the boy's question, and a bitterer irony in her own answer. Yes, go they must, but where and how? Something like a sob of helpless despair clutched at her throat, but she crushed it back resolutely.

"Are you fond of Dr Rayner?" she asked all at once, without looking round. "I mean——" She hesitated, and David Munro's fever-bright eyes rested on her, half surprised, half thoughtful.

"Yes, I think I like him," he said after a moment. "He is so strong and resolute—the sort of man who pushes mountains out of his way to get what he wants. I like that. And then he is going to make me well, you know. He said so."

She made no answer. Someone had knocked at the door, and she started round as though overtaken by a new danger. But it was only a servant who answered her call, and an involuntary sigh of relief escaped her lips.

"A gentleman asking after you, miss," the girl said.

"I didn't catch his name, but he is waiting in the drawing-room. What shall I tell him?"

Nora hesitated. Then her eyes fell on the pale white face against the pillow, and her lips tightened in a line of resolution.

"I shall be down in a moment," she said mechanically. She waited until the servant had gone again, and then she went to the bedside and laid her hand caressingly on the feverish forehead.

"Davy!" she whispered, "Davy, you must try to sleep—you must not worry. You shall go away—you shall grow well and strong—I promise you."

He pressed her hand. He did not seem to hear the rough break in the low voice.

"You little mother," he said, "you little mother. How good you are—there's no one like you in the whole world. I know you would do anything for me."

"Anything!" she repeated almost to herself. She pressed his hand as though in confirmation, and then went softly from the room and down the broad oak staircase. The grey shadows of evening had already begun to creep into the silent hall, and she stood for a moment with her hand clasped before her eyes, seeming to gather all her strength together. Then she turned the handle of the door and entered. So quiet had been her movement that the man by the window did not hear her. He stood with his face half averted, and she recognised the clean-cut, handsome profile with a smothered exclamation. He turned, and the next instant was at her side, had taken her hands in his as though he would have

caught her to him in a stormy embrace. Then he let them drop suddenly, almost roughly, and his face, for an instant alight with happiness, settled into lines of stern resolution.

"I have just arrived from Egypt," he said abruptly. "I first heard of your father's death in Cairo, and I came at once." He passed his hand across his forehead, and she saw that the hair about his temples was grey and that there were marks about the mouth and eyes curiously in contrast to the young, alert figure.

"How tired and ill you look!" she exclaimed with impulsive pity.

"I have travelled night and day," he answered; "and then, you know, my life has not been conducive to eternal youth." He tried to smile at her, but his eyes remained grave. "You mustn't worry about me," he went on with a sudden gentleness. "I don't matter—and besides, I have come to help you if I can, little Nora. You will let me help you, won't you?"

"Yes." She looked up at him gravely and frankly. "I trust you more than anyone," she added. "You were always our friend—and I am so alone."

"Poor little woman!" he answered. He led her to the great armchair by the fire, and stood beside her. The red reflection from the flames fell on her troubled face, but he stood in the shadow, and when she looked up at him he drew back as though to avoid her searching eyes. "Tell me everything!" he urged gently. "Is it true—what I have heard people say?"

"That we are ruined? Yes, it is quite true. It

seems father speculated, and it turned out badly. We have nothing left in the whole world. The lawyer has just told me."

"And David——" he began.

The white hands clenched themselves in a sudden pain, but her voice was tragically quiet and level as she answered.

"He is very ill. Dr Rayner says that if he cannot go abroad he will not live another six months. England is killing him. He says so himself. He is just living to breathe another air. And if I told him the truth I think he would die now."

"Nora, he must know sooner or later. You cannot keep it from him."

She made no answer, and her silence was strangely significant. He bent forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the face which a few weeks before had been a girl's and had now become a woman's. Her lips were firm set, the dark eyes wide open and fixed straight ahead, as though they saw something in the firelight which was as yet hidden from him.

"Tell me!" he said almost sharply, "what are you going to do?"

"I am going to marry."

"Nora!" The name escaped him like a cry of pain. His sinewy bronzed hand caught the back of her chair so that the veins stood out in dark lines, and for a moment the man's iron self-control seemed to yield before the force of the blow. "Nora!" he repeated dully.

She nodded.

"There is no other way," she said.

"Who—who is it?"

"That I cannot tell you—not now."

"But you do not love him?"

"Is that fair?" she asked gently.

"Then you do *not* love him!" he burst out. She turned, and this time he did not draw back. He confronted her in a white-heat of self-forgetfulness and protest, his handsome nervous face ashy, the lines about the mouth and across the forehead grown suddenly deeper as though a rough chisel had been at work amongst them. "You do not love him," he repeated; "you are just selling yourself—it sounds brutal, but it is the truth!"

"Why should I deny it?" she answered steadily. "You know me so well, Harry, that you would see through me if I pretended. I can't pretend, and—and I don't want you to think too badly of me. I know, a woman who sells herself just for the sake of wealth and position is despicable, but perhaps it is different when she sells herself for——" She stopped, and the blinding tears filled her eyes. "For her brother's life," she finished under her breath.

"Nora—my——" He broke off, too, not as she had done, but like a man who has been seized by the throat by some cruel force and crushed to silence. She waited, looking into the fire, her lips parted, but he said nothing. His hands fell limp to his side, and a long pause followed before he spoke again. Even then his voice sounded compressed, stifled, as though he held himself in check only by an effort of the will.

"I don't blame you," he said. "I don't think badly of you—you know I could never do that. You are trying to bring the biggest sacrifice that a woman can bring, but it can't be, dear, it can't be." Again the old nervous movement of the hand across the forehead. "Nora, you have trusted me—and now I must trust you. I want to tell you of a man who had lived a reckless, useless, wasted life, indifferent to himself because he was indifferent to the whole world, but who one day loved a woman, and for her sake went away—because there was a barrier between them, one raised by his own folly and one that might prove insurmountable."

He paused. She lifted her head, and they looked at each other long and steadfastly.

"Nora, if there was a chance that, after all, the barrier was nothing but a phantom, a horrible nightmare, would that woman wait for him, do you think?—only a few days, perhaps? Would she give him that one hope? Would she put off her decision—until he knew?"

"Yes, she would wait," she answered steadfastly.

He lifted her hand to his lips.

"God bless you, dear!" he said.

He did not wait for her to speak again. As though afraid of himself and her, he turned and went quickly, resolutely, to the door. She felt how he stood there looking back at her, but she did not move. She sat with her face buried in her hands and listened to the sound of his dying footsteps.

II

SENTENCED

Dr Edgar Rayner sat alone in his consulting room. On the other side of the closed door a dozen suffering men and women awaited him, but he did not move from his thoughtful attitude, and the low, intermittent murmur of their voices reached his ears unheeded. His brows were knitted, the square, powerful chin and finely-cut lips compressed, and the hand upon the table was clenched so that it seemed carved out of blue-veined marble. Before him lay a letter written in a woman's graceful hand, and once he glanced at it and then quickly away again, as though the sight of it caused him pain—or anger. Around him were all the signs of prosperity, but the face of the man himself bore rather the traces of a defeat and of a defeat badly borne.

So deep was he plunged in his own thoughts that he did not notice that the door behind him had opened. He sat there like a statue until a voice called him by name. Then he sprang to his feet and turned with a startled exclamation.

"Why, Heathcote!" he cried. In the same moment his face relaxed. A pleasant smile of delight and welcome parted his lips, and he advanced with outstretched hand. "Who ever expected to see you, of all people in the world!" he added. "I thought you were at the other end of the earth, old fellow!"

"So I was until a short time ago," the newcomer answered. "Then something unexpected called me back to England—and here I am!"

Rayner laughed.

"It's decent of you to have looked me up so soon," he said, with an almost boyish pleasure. "There, sit down! The people in the next room can wait a little. I must have a look at you and see what mischief the years have done."

"You don't need to blame the years," Heathcote answered, with a grim smile. "There isn't a line on my face which I haven't put there by myself. Good lord, it isn't the years I should like to call back, but my own folly!"

"You were always a bit of a madman," Rayner admitted with a chuckle. "You can't say I didn't warn you though. No man could keep up that racketting life and not have to pay for it in the end. It seems—you have paid." As he spoke he looked across at his visitor, studying every line of the handsome, haggard face with a sudden keen sympathy. "Something has gone pretty wrong, I fancy," he went on after a moment. "Is it anything in which I can help, old fellow?"

"Yes—you are my best friend."

"What is it—financial, physical, or mental?"

Harry Heathcote passed his hand quickly over his forehead. He looked older than he had done on the night when he had confronted Nora Munro with his passionate protest, but his age lay rather in the expression of intense anxiety than in his features or bearing.

"It's not financial," he said with an awkward laugh ; "and it's not exactly physical. Somehow or other, with all my recklessness, I have never been able to exhaust either my strength or my purse. No, it's not that—it's the other thing."

"Good heavens, man! You don't mean to say you have been cultivating nerves?"

"Something like it."

Rayner lay back a little further in his chair. His attitude was now gravely professional, though his expression retained its past friendly concern.

"Perhaps you had better explain," he remarked after a moment. "You know I'd do anything to help you."

Heathcote nodded.

"Yes, I know ; and, besides, you are one of the rising stars, so I am told." He hesitated, and then went on slowly, "I'd better make a clean breast of it. A doctor is a sort of father-confessor, isn't he? I can trust you, old chap?"

The other held out his hand.

"Yes, you can trust me," he said simply.

"Thanks. You know quite a lot already. Among other things you know that as a young man I was left with a big fortune, and no one on this earth who cared a straw what became of me—except as regards my money. I didn't care myself, and, as a natural consequence, I didn't do much good either. I just wandered from one mess into another, and burnt the candle at both ends as hard as I knew how. I can't say I ever did anybody any harm ; I was just wild

and reckless and always on the look out for fresh trouble. About six years ago—I was then twenty-five—I found what I wanted with a vengeance. It was out in India—a silly flirtation with a Rana who took a fancy to me and whom I ran after out of pure devilment. Well, I got this for my pains." With the old familiar movement he pushed back his hair from his forehead and revealed a deep red scar which ran from the ear to the frontal bone. Rayner bent a little closer and nodded.

"Go on!" he said.

"It didn't seem much at the time—in fact, I was thankful to get off with my life—but afterwards it began to trouble me. The wound healed badly, thanks to my neglect, and in the end I went to a specialist about it. I hardly know why I went, for at that time I didn't care what became of me." He stopped and took a short breath, as though preparing himself for an effort. "The specialist was a great gun like you, and he did not waste many words on me. What he said was straight from the shoulder. The scientific part of it I didn't understand, but I grasped the verdict all right——"

"The verdict——?" Rayner queried.

"Gradual mental decay—in the end complete breakdown—Heaven knows, perhaps worse."

There was a moment's silence. Rayner's face had grown graver. There was even a gleam of pity in his keen grey eyes as he looked at the man opposite him. Perhaps Heathcote felt that pity, for he looked up and stiffened.

"That's all," he said.

"And the name of this specialist?"

"Macarthy."

Heathcote's eyes were once more turned away, and he did not see the change which came over his companion's face. The pity had given place to a puzzled expression, and then, as he began to hunt amongst the papers on the table, Rayner's lips relaxed from their stern lines.

"You say you did not care in those days," he remarked, after a moment. "What makes you care now? A woman in the question?"

Heathcote nodded.

"Yes, it's a woman," he said. "At the time—well, it was a pretty nasty blow, but I promised myself that somehow or other I should get myself off the active lists before—before the ugly thing came, and in the end I nearly forgot all about it. Now, I must know the truth once and for all. I must know if there is after all any hope that Macarthy was wrong."

Rayner was still hunting amongst his papers.

"As an old friend, would it be fair to ask you to be a little more explicit?" he asked lightly. "I don't want to be indiscreet, but I confess I am curious to know what sort of a miracle this woman must be to have made my old Harry care so much about his precious person."

The reflection of a dare-devil humour flashed over Heathcote's lips.

"I have no objection," he said, "and it can do no one any harm. I have loved her for five years. It

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was she who made me feel that whatever happened I should face it out like a man, and it is for her sake that I have spent five years—wiping things off the slate. It is for her sake that I have come back.”

“Patience run out, eh?”

“No, it's not that. I know I'm a selfish sort of beast, but for once I wasn't thinking of myself altogether. She's in trouble—desperate trouble, and I must help her.” He rose from his seat as though inactivity goaded him. “I believe she cares—Heaven knows why, but something tells me she does—and if your verdict sets me free from the curse which is crushing me, I shall ask her to be my wife.”

“Her!” Rayner echoed with the same intonation of kindly mockery. “Are names forbidden, old friend?”

“You know her.”

“I?” Rayner had evidently found the paper he wanted. He held it in his hand as though to offer it to his companion; he now drew it slowly back, and a curious change came over his face. “I?” he repeated.

Heathcote made no answer. He seemed scarcely to have heard the question, and Rayner leant forward, twisting the paper between his powerful fingers, his brows knitted in what seemed a moment's tense, concentrated thought.

“I suppose you mean Nora Munro?” he said slowly, tentatively.

Heathcote nodded.

"You've hit it again," he said. "It wasn't hard to guess, though."

Another long, oppressive silence. Every muscle in Rayner's face had stiffened to steel, the skin had become almost transparent, and the mouth beneath the fair, short moustache had formed itself into a straight, inflexible line. It was as though the whole man had become a mass of nerves and sinews, strained taut in a silent, vital struggle.

"And you want my verdict?" he asked quietly.

"That's it. Rayner, I must have it now and at once. You don't need to mince matters. If it comes to the worst I shall find a way out—for her and for me."

Rayner rose also to his feet. He pushed the paper carelessly from him as though it no longer interested him, but the letter he held crushed in his hand.

"Macarthy was the greatest mental specialist we have ever had," he said. "Heathcote—I dare not reverse a verdict which he has given—I cannot."

Heathcote turned. His sunken eyes met the clear, steady gaze and read there his sentence. Instinctively he stretched out his hand, gripping the back of a chair for support.

"You mean—the worst?"

"I mean that I cannot alter the laws of nature. I believe from what I have seen, from my experience of such things, from what you yourself have told me, that Macarthy was right. The pressing danger is there. I dare not comfort you with a lie."

For a full minute Heathcote stood motionless. Then the horror, the fear which had spoken out of his eyes subsided, his grip upon the chair relaxed. He stood upright, and when he spoke again, it was with a calm dignity, an almost matter-of-fact simplicity.

"Thanks for letting me have the truth straight out," he said; "it makes matters much easier. You have been honest, and I am awfully grateful." He stopped a moment, and then went on. "Rayner, I shan't wait for the worst. I shall clear out, and when I am gone I want you to do something for me. You know I have no one in the world for whom I need care, and I am a rich man as things go. If I gave my fortune into your hands, would you give it to her—when you hear that it is all over with me?"

"Man—what do you mean?"

Heathcote shrugged his shoulders.

"The dead have no need of money," he said. "Still, I don't want to drag her into the publicity which an ordinary will would cause. People might wonder. I shall simply give my fortune into your hands, and then I shall go mountaineering, and there will be an accident—and then you will tell her that she is rich and independent. That is all."

Rayner looked up. His forehead was clammy with the dew of fear, his compressed lips were colourless.

"I can't!" he stammered. "I should be an accomplice—a murderer."

"Dear fellow, don't use such big words. You would do the same in my place. If it wasn't for—

for her I shouldn't have told you. As it is I need your help. You are her friend and mine. You will do as I ask."

Rayner's fingers played with the letter before him.

"She has no need of your money," he said hoarsely.

"Every need—the greatest need a woman could have. You know that she is left penniless—and there is the brother."

"There are those who would help her!" Rayner broke in.

"Yes, for a price—I know that. But she shall not have to pay that price—not if I can save her."

Rayner threw back his head. The nervous indecision had vanished. His eyes met Heathcote's with a steadfastness that was not unmingled with smothered defiance.

"You are a free agent," he said. "You must do as you think fit."

"Then you will help me? If you do not I shall find some other means. But you are my friend—I shall feel more secure if the matter is left to you. It's good to have someone whom one can trust."

He held out his hand, but Rayner looked away as though he had not seen it.

"And if I promised—what then?"

"You would hear of me once again—and then no more."

This time Rayner took the still outstretched hand. He held it in a grip of iron.

"I promise," he said.

"And you will help her to forget——"

"Yes, I will help her to forget," he said under his breath. "I promise!"

III

THE PROMISE IS KEPT

"Take care of Davy, Nora, take care of him, won't you? He has no one else left in the world but you."

Nora lifted her head. It seemed to her that the words had been whispered into her ears by some invisible presence. She heard them as the dying man had uttered them weeks before, half pleadingly, half commandingly, and she heard her own passionate, heart-broken promise, given without thought or knowledge of the future. Then it had seemed to her so natural, so obvious that she should take care of the delicate, fifteen-year-old boy; it had seemed strange that her father should have looked at her with such restless despair in his eyes. Then she had not understood. She understood now. She looked about her. The thick November fog seemed to hang from the very curtains and to creep like a stealthy ghost to where David lay tossing in feverish sleep. Now and again a dry, hacking cough broke from his lips, and each time she shrank back deeper into her chair, as though he had struck at her with his thin wasted hand. And to-morrow she would have to tell him the truth, that they were homeless, that they must go—whither she did not know.

The little cash-box upon the table was empty, the few simple jewels that had once been hers had gone their way. The end of the hopeless, desperate struggle was at hand, and she sat there listening to the echo of her promise and to the quick, broken breathing which seemed to grow fainter as the darkness about her deepened. Every moment seemed charged with tragedy. Presently David's eyes opened.

"Nora!" he called; "Nora!"

In an instant she was at his side, bending over him, her cool, firm hand grasping his.

"Yes, dear. What is it? Tell me quickly."

"Oh, Nora, the air suffocates me—I can't breathe. You promised that we should go away. What are we waiting for? Is it for Heathcote you are waiting?" His voice sounded high and querulous, and there was something almost delirious in his excited words. Unjust as the reproach was she yet coloured deeply. "It is for Heathcote," he exclaimed, his burning eyes searching her face. "You think he will keep his promise and come back and help us? I know he won't. He's not that sort—he's too selfish. Rayner said so."

"I do not believe it!" Nora broke in passionately.

"Then why doesn't he come if he promised? He knows that you have no one to help you. He has simply forgotten us—and yet you go on waiting for him. Why?"

She drew back a little so that he could not see her face. Even in the part darkness she feared the intensity of the eyes which sought an answer. She

knew that she *had* waited, hour by hour, day by day. She knew now by the very poignancy of her despair that she had waited year by year—and he had never come. Had the barrier proved too great—or was it that he had never really cared? She looked down into the thin sunken face beside her, and her heart smote her with a sickening remorse. It seemed to her excited fancy that every line of pain and weariness was a reproach—because she had waited, because she had dared obey the promptings of her own heart against the sterner behests of a given promise.

"Davy," she whispered, "I must wait—I promised—just one day more, dear, and then you shall go away—whatever it may cost."

He did not answer, but lay with his face averted, and she heard by his breathing that he had dropped back into a troubled sleep. Softly she turned away, and as she did so she became aware that someone had entered and was standing in the open doorway.

She saw a tall, upright figure silhouetted against the half-darkness, and in that moment a wild hope brought a cry to her lips.

"Harry!"

At the sound of her voice he came further into the room, closing the door behind him. The yellow evening light fell on his face, and she saw then who it was, and stood motionless, frozen by the bitterness of a lost hope.

"I am sorry to frighten you," he said quietly. "I thought David might be asleep, and I did not want

to wake him." He bent over the motionless figure and listened for a moment in silence. "Poor fellow!" he said under his breath.

The tone of mingled pity and concern roused her from her lethargy. She caught him by the arm.

"Doctor, is he worse? For pity's sake tell me the truth?"

"I have told you the truth before," he answered sternly. "He cannot live here. Every day in this atmosphere is a step nearer to the end." She turned away, but he followed her and took her reluctant hand in his. "If you would only let me help you, Nora!" he said gently.

"No one can help me!" she answered in an outburst of despair. "I am penniless—to-morrow we shall be homeless—and he is dying!"

"Nora, he need not die! I swear to you I could save him if you would only let me!" He bent closer to her. His face was whiter than hers, his hold upon her arm almost cruel. "Dear, you don't know how I love you. I would give my life to help you. I asked you once already, and you wrote me that it could not be—that there was another man in your life. Who is that other man? Why does he not come to you—now in your hour of need?"

She did not answer him. Instinctively she glanced towards the door, as though she expected it to open and the man for whom she waited enter. But there was no sound save the rumble in the busy street beneath, and Rayner went on doggedly:

"You say that you do not love me, but I tell you

that love will come—must come. I love you too desperately, you cannot always remain indifferent. I would sell my soul for you, Nora. No man on earth could love you as I do!”

He spoke under his breath so as not to awake the sleeper, but his voice vibrated with a passion the violence of which startled her. She felt that he trembled, and there was something desperate, agonised in his words which awoke an inexplicable mingling of pity and aversion in her heart.

“I would to Heaven that I could love you!” she said faintly. “I cannot.”

“And to-morrow you will be thrown out on to the streets? You will let your brother die?”

She shivered and tried to free herself.

“You are cruel!” she said.

“Cruel only to help you, Nora. Give me the right to protect you both!”

She turned and looked him gravely in the face.

“Would you marry me, knowing that another man filled my whole life?” she asked.

“I would risk it—my love would win you in the end.”

“I cannot!” she repeated, despairingly.

“Nora, I would make you happy—I would save his life!”

“I cannot forget!” she answered.

He stood looking down at her beautiful, unhappy face. Though she did not see it, his own had undergone a rapid, violent change. The profound tenderness had yielded to a hard resolution. His lips were

tightly compressed; his eyes were bright with a thwarted, ugly fire.

"You must!" he muttered. "You must!"

Down below in the street a newspaper boy's shrill voice rose above the dull roar of the traffic. He listened. His attitude was that of a man who hears something for which he has been long waiting, and then slowly his grip upon her arm relaxed, and he drew back from her as though an invisible force had come between them.

"What are they calling?" she asked listlessly.

"Wait!" he answered.

She heard him go across the room and then the sound of his footsteps on the uncarpeted stairs. How long he was gone she hardly knew. She stood there listening to David's hard-drawn breath, and fought out the last fierce battle. "Take care of him! Take care of him!"

Again she listened to the stern reminder from the depths of her tortured conscience; and then it was Heathcote's voice she heard, earnest, pleading, full of a profound emotion. She saw his eyes with their unspoken promise: "I will come again!" And he had not come. Perhaps, after all, he had not cared, or the barrier had been too great. She stood now before the final choice—herself or her brother's life, the sacrifice of her own heart or the breaking of a sacred duty. She heard Rayner re-enter the room, but she did not turn. She prayed for a respite—for a day, an hour, but none was granted her. Rayner came straight to her side. He held a paper in his

hand, and with an unsteady finger he pointed to a headline.

"Look!" he said.

She obeyed, but saw nothing. A horrible presentiment blinded her; the letters swam before her eyes, and through a thick mist she heard Rayner speaking, his voice high and strained with excitement.

"There has been an accident," he stammered, "an accident on the high Alps—Heathcote is dead!"

He repeated the sentence again and again, as though striving to pierce through to her innermost consciousness. His face was grey and drawn, but his eyes watched her with a hungry triumph.

"Then it *was* Heathcote!" he said; and by an extraordinary change his voice warmed with a boundless tenderness, "Poor little woman!" He drew closer to her, and she watched him, hypnotised by his strength, stunned by the awful finality of the blow. "For David's sake!" he whispered. "Let me take his place—let me help you! You have no one else now!"

Still she did not answer. David had stirred restlessly, and a stifled moan broke upon the waiting silence. It seemed as though the sound shattered the last wall of her defence. She stretched out her hand blindly, and he caught it and held it between his own.

"Nora!" he pleaded.

"For David's sake!" she answered. And then suddenly she wavered—he caught her to him with

an exclamation that was half triumph, half fear. For her eyes were closed, and she lay quiet and motionless in his arms.

IV

FROM THE DEAD

The picturesque chalet stood at the base of the high range of mountains, and from his study window Rayner could see peak after peak of the snow-covered giants, silhouetted in dazzling splendour against the evening sky. He stood at the casement, looking out, his eyes fixed ~~on~~ one point with a sombre interest.

"So it was there!" he remarked, half to himself. The roughly-clad Swiss mountaineer who stood awkwardly beside him nodded confirmation.

"Just where my finger points!" he said eagerly. "You can see the path running up from the base. About half way up he left me to make some experiments—so he said—and shortly afterwards I heard the roar of the avalanche. I never saw him again."

"His body was not found, then?"

The guide laughed grimly.

"It's not the way of the Grand Trou to give up its dead," he said, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the central mountain whose peaks the Alpenglügen had begun to touch with a faint rose. "Nobody has ever found the bottom, and it was of no use looking, especially as no one seemed to worry about him. They said he was a great explorer or

something, but you are only the second who has ever asked about him in all these months."

"The second?" Rayner had turned with a startled, uneasy movement. "Who else has asked?"

"A lady," the guide answered, with a cunning glance at the questioner's face. "If I am not mistaken, it was the Herr's own wife. She asked me to show her the spot—it was only a week ago. She seemed very sad. A relation, perhaps?"

"No," Rayner answered shortly. "A friend."

"Ach so!" The guide nodded, with a sly sagacity. "Still, a friend is always something. I am sorry I told her all."

"What more is there to tell?"

The guide drew a step nearer. His rough, uneven voice sank almost to a whisper, as though he feared to be overheard.

"They say the Grand Trou is haunted, Herr," he said. "I know not if it be true. Myself, I have seen nothing, but there are those who pretend that at nights they have seen a light at the summit of the mountain, and others that a spirit wanders about the edge of the crevice where no others have ventured." His bronzed, bony hand fell on Rayner's arm. "There was a stranger who even told of a man who found him, wounded and helpless in the midst of a storm, and miraculously carried him to a hut where he tended him until the daybreak, when he brought him within reach of help. Bah! I do not believe such stories. No doubt the stranger dreamed—or lied. We did not believe him."

Rayner loosened himself impatiently from the half-unconscious clasp.

"It would have been easy enough to verify the story," he remarked. "Has no hut ever been found?"

"No, Herr. It is at any rate not on the route and ——" He stopped, grinning sheepishly.

"And you are all too cowardly to look further," Rayner concluded, with a contemptuous movement of the shoulders. The guide drew himself erect.

"We are not afraid of what is natural," he said. "I have faced death more than once in my life and not flinched; but when the Herr Gott sends a soul to wander on earth it bodes ill—it bodes retribution, and a simple man keeps out of the way."

Rayner laughed, and taking a silver piece from his pocket put it into the greedily outstretched hand.

"Thanks for your unsolicited wisdom," he said. "Fortunately, I do not share your opinions on ghosts and retribution. That will do—you can go."

He watched the bent figure as it shuffled across the room and through the curtained doorway. Then, as though drawn by an irresistible fascination, his eyes wandered back to the mountain opposite, and rested there in moody, troubled thought.

"Retribution!" he repeated aloud, and then laughed again. The sound startled him. He turned quickly, as though he feared some one might have overheard him, and his hand went unsteadily to his forehead. Heathcote was dead. He had a moment before heard the story of the final catastrophe from the lips of an eye-witness, and had himself gazed down into

the impenetrable darkness of the crevice in which Heathcote had found escape from the horror of coming madness. There was no mistake. For two years the dead man had hidden in the silence of his bottomless grave, and he, Rayner, had grasped the spoils of his victory. There was nothing to fear. He held out his hand and looked at it. Do what he would he could not overcome its nervous trembling. In the mirror opposite he caught a glimpse of a face, and, with a start of irrepressible alarm, recognised the haggard features and sunken eyes as his own. The two short years had been sufficient to bring about the change, and yet there had not been a cloud to mar his happiness. He had won the only woman who had ever played a part in his ambitious life, and if he had paid a high price to win her, the price of his own soul, what did that matter? He did not believe in souls or in retribution. He believed only in Success, however obtained; and he had been successful—eminently successful. The thought of all he had won through the simple strength of his will gave him back his self-possession. He threw back his shoulders, and with a firm step went across the room, over the shady hall, and into his wife's boudoir. Instinctively he sought her presence, as though to assure himself of the reality of his victory against Fate; and yet he stopped short on the threshold, baffled and silenced by an indefinable Something against which his iron will had always fought in vain.

It was his wife who looked up to greet him, but there was no welcome on her pale, wan face.

He might have been a stranger to her; a shadowy barrier divided them, and his impotence goaded him to exasperation. He had meant to speak tenderly to her, to call up a faint smile in her eyes, to overpower her silent resistance by the strength of his undiminished love, and instead only irritable words rose to his lips. He conquered them with an effort, but his smile was forced, almost a sneer.

"It is time we were moving on from this place," he said, after a moment. "You look pale and ill. I cannot think why you are attached to such a dead-and-alive hole. I hate it."

"It was you who brought us here," she remarked quietly.

He repressed a start and a hot denial. He knew that she had spoken the truth. Unwillingly, driven by a morbid force outside himself, he had wandered from place to place until in ever-narrowing circles he had been drawn to this lonely mountain village, in sight of the spot where Heathcote had met—or sought—his death. David Munro, who had been arranging some photographs at a table, turned and looked at him. There was no love in the glance, rather a curious dislike and distrust.

"I like being here," he said, a flush rising to his still delicate face. "I feel better here than anywhere else."

"That has nothing to do with it," Rayner retorted sharply. "Next week we shall leave here—we shall go back to England."

"Back to England!" Nora laid her work aside,

and rose quickly to her feet. "Edgar, you can't mean what you say! The winter is coming on, and you know that David could not stand it—you said so yourself. Or do you mean that we should stay here alone?"

Rayner laughed. He had not until that moment thought of returning to England, but a kind of inexplicable fury possessed him. Her very beauty and the look in the boy's eyes, his own thwarted love, goaded him to a savage act of cruelty.

"Leave you here—to weep over Heathcote's grave; to go prying about the village? Thank you—you ask too much. We shall leave in a week's time."

He pushed her roughly on one side, and passed out of the French window into the little garden which surrounded the chalet, but she followed him. She laid her hand upon his arm, so that he was forced to stop and looked down into her face.

"Edgar," she said, in an earnest undertone. "You dare not do what you say! Remember your promise to me!"

"Have I not kept it? Have I not given your brother health and strength? Have I not saved you from the direst poverty? Have I not made you happy? It is you who have not kept your promise!"

"Mine?" she echoed dully. He caught her by the wrist. The smothered rage of a will baffled by an invisible enemy had at last broken the bonds of his self-control. His eyes blazed with bitterness and something that was like despair.

"You promised that you would forget, and you

have not forgotten. That—that man has never lost his place in your heart. He is never out of your thoughts night or day. I know it. I have seen it in your face, in your eyes.”

She looked away from him, and gazed wistfully at the distant mountain, rising in majestic splendour against the darkening sky.

“I have done my best,” she said brokenly. “I have fought against it, Edgar. I have tried to bury memory in his grave—I have tried to think of him as dead. I cannot. It always seems—even here—that I must see him again; that he is not far from me.”

He drew back from her with an irrepressible shudder.

“You give way to your wild fancies,” he said. “You encourage them. Heathcote is dead—and I am alive. Have you no pity for me? I love you, and you give me nothing. You shrink from me. You have taught yourself and David to hate me.”

“That is not true!” she said earnestly. “I have striven to do my duty—more I never promised. Edgar, I did not deceive you. I told you then that it was for David’s sake—to save his life. You knew it and were content. I have given you all I could—more I cannot give.”

“Nora, will you never be able to give me more? Will the dead always stand between us?”

For the first time his tone of rough authority softened. He held out his hands pleadingly towards her, but she seemed not to see them. The moon had

risen above the mountain peaks, and by the pale grey light he saw that her cheeks were wet with tears.

"I do not know," she said gently. "I think, perhaps, some women can only love once in their lives and then no more. I think I am like that. But you have saved Davy. I—I am very grateful."

"Grateful!" He turned away from her, and without another word strode out of the garden on to the mountain road, which wound like a silver ribbon down to the village. She saw him hesitate and look back as though hoping for a sign, but she remained motionless, and he disappeared into the deepening shadows.

For a full minute she stood where he had left her, struggling to overcome the storm of pain which had so long lain hidden in the silence of her heart. She had forgotten everything else, and when suddenly an arm was slipped through hers, she started as though she had been awakened from a dream.

"Nora!" David said. "Nora!" She looked quickly into his prematurely grave face, and in a flash of intuition she knew that he had heard and that her jealously guarded secret was hers no longer. "Nora," he repeated, "I couldn't help it—I heard what you said—it was for my sake. I do not understand and I must. What was for my sake? What have you done?" She made no answer, and his hold upon her arm tightened. "Nora, I believe I can guess. You married Edgar to save me. Why?"

"We were ruined," she said huskily.

"Ruined!" he echoed. For a moment he stood quiet at her side, his young brows knitted in a swift

connecting of the links of memory, and then he looked at her, awe-struck, overwhelmed.

"You sacrificed yourself for *me*!" he said. "You gave yourself to save my life! Oh, Nora!"

She tried to smile at him, but he saw something in her eyes which, boy though he was, filled him with an agony of self-reproach.

"And I plagued you and worried you!" he exclaimed, passionately remorseful. "It was I who drove you to it with my complaining and impatience! Nora—and you cared for poor old Heathcote? That was why you waited?"

"He is dead," she said gently. "He was dead when I consented; otherwise—even for you I might not have been able to have done it—God knows!"

A silence fell between them. His hand still clasped in hers, they walked down to the gate and stood together gazing out on to the panorama of moonlit mountains before them, both plunged in their own thoughts. Far off a torrent roared tumultuously on its way down from the heights, and its muffled thunder alone broke the mysterious hush around them. Suddenly David's hold upon her hand tightened.

"Nora, if Heathcote cared too, why did he go away? Why did he not stand by you when you were in such need? Was he the selfish cad that Edgar has called him?"

She lifted her head in proud protest.

"There was a barrier between us," she said. "He never told me what it was, but it proved too great to

be surmounted, and so he went away. I have never understood, and now it is too late—but I trust him because I love him.”

“And Edgar knew——?”

“Yes. I would not deceive him.”

“And yet he forced you—he bought you, knowing everything as he did!” He clenched his delicate hand in a sudden fit of boyish passion. “Now I know why I have learnt to hate him!” he said between his teeth. She drew him closer to her with a despairing tenderness.

“Don’t, dear! You mustn’t. He is my husband, and you must help me. We must both do our duty, and—he saved your life.”

“I would give my life a dozen times to bring back poor old Heathcote and see you happy again!” he retorted fiercely.

She shook her head with a faint sigh.

“We cannot bring back the dead,” she said.

Both relapsed again into silence. From afar off they could hear the tinkle of the cow-bells on the mountain side, and then, after a moment, the sound of rapid, approaching footsteps.

“Edgar!” the boy muttered under his breath. Instinctively they drew closer together and waited, but it was not Edgar’s figure that appeared suddenly on the bend of the road above them. It was another figure, taller, slighter, clothed in loose rags, which fluttered in the breeze as he came on with swift strides towards them. There was something ghostly, unreal, in the agility of his movements, and they watched in

curious reasonless suspense. Within a few yards of where they stood he turned his face towards them. The moon was by now well risen, and a full clear ray fell on the emaciated features, the sunken, gleaming eyes, the suffering mouth. The whole face was stamped with an agony that was like the agony of death. For an instant he stood motionless before them, and then a cry broke the stillness.

"Harry—oh, Harry!" She held out wild appealing hands towards the vision. Then a black mist seemed to engulf her. She called the name again, but there was no answer; and when gradually the darkness cleared, the moonlight patch before her was empty and she stood alone.

V

IN THE FASTNESS

Higher and higher up, over grim rocks whose massive outlines stood out against the silver moonlight, passed roaring torrents, further and further into the lonely waste where the shadows deepened and the silence seemed to become death-like in its intensity! Fearless but with hard-drawn breath and aching limbs David Munro followed the phantom figure before him, his frail strength gathered together for the supreme effort whose end and goal he dared not even guess at. They had left the valley far beneath them; the lights of the village had disappeared, he was alone with the dead in a region where one false step might mean destruction.

Already they had passed the snow-line, and an icy wind struck against his burning cheeks, but he neither slackened speed nor hesitated. High above him he saw the towering shadow of the mountain, seeming to grow in its gigantic proportions with every instant, and within a few yards the strange unearthly, yet familiar figure, swinging from rock to rock as though borne by a superhuman force. The path, such as it was, had now narrowed. They were winding round the face of a mighty precipice of rock, and beneath him David felt rather than saw the yawning chasm of the Grand Trou. Unprepared, unpractised as he was, he stumbled blindly forward, clinging to the frozen wall, fighting heroically against the dizzy sickness which was creeping over his reeling brain. He had only one thought—to solve the mystery before him, to learn the truth at whatever cost. He looked up. They had now wound round the side of the mountain, and above him he saw the sharp outline of a narrow projecting plateau. There the phantom figure had stopped and seemed to be looking back as though striving to penetrate the darkness in which the track was plunged.

"Heathcote!" the boy called breathlessly. "Heathcote—help!" He hardly knew why he called, or with what hope. His strength had suddenly failed him—his grip upon the slippery rocks weakened, and in that moment of horror, when he felt the destruction beneath holding out hungry, greedy hands to grasp him, he called aloud, forgetting that he had called upon death itself to save him. "Heathcote!" he repeated.

"Heathcote!" His voice had risen to a scream. It seemed to him that the end had come. He felt himself sinking back into a bottomless darkness when he was seized in a grip of iron and for an instant balanced between heaven and earth. A moment's absolute blankness ensued, and then, as the wavering consciousness returned, he felt himself being laid gently down. He felt the touch of warm, powerful hands; he caught them in his own, holding them fast, and then looked up into the face bending over him.

"Heathcote!" he gasped under his breath. He knew then, even in the half darkness, that it was no phantom who had caught him back from the jaws of a hideous death, but the man himself, haggard and aged, but unmistakable. The hair hung wild about the thin, sunken face, but even in the rags in which he was clothed there was still an attempt at the old scrupulousness, in the eyes a flash of the old devil-may-care daring.

"That was a near thing!" he said gently. "It might have gone badly with you. That comes of following the dead, Davy!"

"The dead!" The boy dragged himself upright, and clung to the other's shoulders as though he feared that he would escape him. "You are not dead! You have been alive all these months, hidden in this awful place. Why—why have you done it?"

Heathcote freed himself gently from the desperate clutch.

"That's something I can't tell you," he answered. "Don't ask further. You did wrong to follow me."

You must go back and forget! Look upon me as the rest of the world looks upon me—as dead. Would to Heaven that I were!”

The tone of smothered agony in the low, restrained voice touched the boy to the quick. He also rose and faced Heathcote in the pale grey light.

“What is it?” he implored. “What was it sent you away from her? Didn’t you care? Didn’t you know that she was waiting for you? Don’t you know that even now her heart is breaking for you?”

“For me!” Heathcote interrupted with a hard laugh. “I do not think her heart is easily broken. Yes, I was a fool—I thought she cared. She cared nothing.” He looked David sharply in the face. “You think I do not know all that has happened?” he asked bitterly. “You are wrong. The guide who knows my secret and brings me food, brings me also news of the world which has forgotten me. I knew that you were here—I knew that a few weeks after my death she became Rayner’s wife. I knew then—what her love was worth.”

“Heathcote, you don’t know! She loved you with her whole heart. I know she loves you to this day. It was for my sake she married—to save me!”

Heathcote had been standing with his arms folded across his chest. He turned now, and a swift change came over his haggard face.

“To save you?” he echoed.

“I was so ill. She knew that if I could not go out of England I should die. And we were penniless. There was no money, and Rayner pressed her.

Don't you understand? She sacrificed herself in the only way she could."

Heathcote lifted his hand with a fierce movement of disbelief.

"That is a lie!" he said harshly. "She was rich. From the hour that the world heard of my death she was a wealthy woman. My whole fortune was hers—I left it her. I gave it in trust to Rayner for her!"

"Rayner!" David caught him excitedly by the arm. "Heathcote, I don't believe it! He never gave it her—I am almost sure!"

As though he had received a brutal blow across the face, Heathcote reeled, clinging to David for support.

"He was my friend!" he said under his breath. "My best friend! It is impossible—you are lying to me!"

"I swear to you—it is the truth! You don't know him. He would trample on anything, on anyone, so long as he had his will. Why should she have married him but for that? If she could have saved me by any other means, she wouldn't have done so. She told me so—this very night. She told Rayner so—he knew!"

"He knew!" Heathcote was trembling violently; the hand which held David's burnt with fever. "David, think what you are saying! You mean that he cheated me, that he forced her, that he won her by a trick?"

"Yes, I mean it!" the boy answered with a passionate earnestness. "I have always hated him, and now I know why. He cheated you, and he has

broken her heart. Didn't you see her face, Heathcote? Didn't you see how sad and old she has grown? I tell you, her heart is broken! Why did you leave her? If you really cared, why didn't you stand by her?"

Heathcote's shaking hands were clasped before his face. He seemed mastered by a frightful, soul-wrecking storm of emotion. It was in vain that the boy tried to draw his hands away and calm him. The moon had passed behind a bank of rising clouds, and in the grim darkness and solitude which surrounded them, David realised dimly that this man had suffered. In his imagination he saw the little plateau banked in the winter's snow, he heard the roaring of the winds, the thunder of the avalanches, and knew then that Heathcote had sought death in vain.

"Why did you leave her?" he repeated helplessly. "Heathcote, I must go back and tell her the truth. I must tell her that you are alive."

Heathcote started upright. Even through the gloom David shrank involuntarily from the expression in the wide staring eyes.

"No, no!" he said in a tense whisper. "Let her believe that it was a dream—a phantom. Don't let her know. I am lost to her. Don't you see—I am mad!"

The words broke from his lips like a cry of agony, and then there was a long, unbroken silence. David had drawn back to the walls of the roughly built hut, and stood there motionless, his young blood frozen with horror.

"Mad!" he echoed hoarsely.

Heathcote nodded.

"It is coming. I am doomed—sentenced. All these months I have prayed that I might be released, but death has always passed by. And now the horror is coming—it is growing closer and closer—I feel it here—here!" He put his hand wildly to his head, and then, with a last effort of the will, he caught David by the hand and drew him toward the narrow ledge along which they had come. "Go—go! forget me—leave me to my fate!"

"Heathcote—it can't be true!"

The other laughed sombrely.

"Do you think a man buries himself alive without reason? It was the barrier between Nora and myself—the knowledge that one day it would come and make me into a helpless child. When I knew, I came here to these mountains that I loved. I let you think that I was dead—even Rayner believes it——"

"Rayner! Then he knew——?"

"It was he who pronounced sentence."

"Heathcote, suppose he lied!"

Neither spoke for an instant. It seemed to both that an abyss had opened at their feet, a hideous abyss of evil, incredible, awful in its bottomless cruelty. Then Heathcote shook his head.

"It was not Rayner alone," he said hoarsely. "I knew it before—his was the final verdict. Go, Davy, comfort her, and let her never know the truth." He pushed the boy gently forward. "I shall watch you until you are in safety," he added. "Go!"

"Heathcote, I can't leave you! You are ill—your hand burns like fire—you are suffering!"

"Go!" was the stern repetition. "You cannot help me."

David resisted no longer. In silence he began the descent, but at a bend of the dangerous path he looked back at the solitary figure outlined against the violet sky. And then it seemed to him that a shadow hung above the plateau—the shadow which hung above Heathcote's own life. With bent head the boy stumbled back along the dangerous way, that shadow ever in his heart.

VI

TRACKED DOWN

The dawn had already begun to break over the white-capped peaks as Edgar Rayner softly entered his wife's room. She sat as she had sat throughout the long night by the window overlooking the mountains, but now weariness had closed her watching eyes, and she lay back in her chair, the first rays of morning sunlight falling upon her fair hair and touching with an ethereal beauty the pale, sad face. For a few minutes he stood quietly by her side, and then, as though yielding to an overpowering impulse, he bent down and kissed her on the forehead. She stirred; a shade seemed to have crossed her dreams, and then once more fatigue gained the mastery and she slept on. Rayner silently drew the curtain so that the light should not disturb her. In all his

movements there was an almost womanly tenderness and consideration, and his face, as he looked down at her, lost its lines of iron purpose and became gentle, almost pitying.

For a time there was no movement in the quiet room; then, as though in the depths of her sleep the consciousness of his presence weighed upon her, she looked up. He saw the dawning recognition, he saw how her features stiffened. She seemed to shrink back into her chair, to draw away from him as from something of which she was instinctively afraid.

"Has he come back?" she asked faintly.

He shook his head.

"We have heard nothing. Another search party is going out from the village in an hour's time. We could do nothing more before daybreak."

She sprang restlessly to her feet.

"I shall accompany them," she said. "I cannot stay here and endure this suspense. It will drive me mad."

"Hush!" he said. "It is impossible for you to go. You were both overstrung already last night, or you would not have had such wild fancies. We should have left here long ago. We should never have come to the scene of Heathcote's death—it has got upon your nerves and excited your imagination."

He tried to speak lightly, but his voice sounded unsteady, and she looked at him with a strange suspicion in her tired eyes.

"David saw him too," she said, half to herself. "I heard him cry out. He must have gone after him

—and now he, too, is lost, perhaps dead. It seems I must lose everyone I love.”

He winced as though she had struck him across the face.

“Everyone?” he repeated. “Am I then, nothing, worse than nothing to you, Nora?”

She made no answer, and the angry blood rushed to his face. The next moment he held out his hands towards her in impulsive pleading.

“Nora, why are you so hard on me? Have I not striven to make you happy? Have I left anything undone that a man could do to win your love?”

She shook her head sadly and wearily.

“You have done everything,” she said; “only—I am sorry—but I do not love you. I have done my best, but I cannot.”

“Will nothing ever change you? Can I do nothing?”

“Nothing.”

There was a finality in the one word and in her voice which silenced his last protest. His arms fell powerless to his side. His iron will, which had overridden every obstacle, recoiled helpless before this woman's passive, patient resistance. He had indeed won her, he had forced her to give her life into his keeping, but her heart, the innermost part of herself, was not his and would never be. There was a shadow between them, and for the first time he knew himself defeated by a power greater than his own. The thought maddened him. He had always forced Fate to go the way of his will, and now it seemed as

though she mocked at his impotent struggles and laughed at his victory, which had become a bitter humiliation; was there indeed no hope, no way to overcome the invisible barrier? He watched her as she stood by the open window and saw the grief and fear written on the pale features. With a humility that was new to him he took her unresisting hand in his.

"I will try and bring David back to you safe and sound," he said. She turned; her whole face lit up with a moment's radiant gratitude, and there was an expression in her eyes which he had never seen before.

"Thank you!" she said simply.

"I would give my life to win only a kindly thought from you, Nora," he said between his clenched teeth. Even in her own anxiety she could not close her ears against the profound emotion in his voice and words. She tried to smile at him, to bring some answering tenderness to her lips. She thought of all he had done for her, of her own ingratitude, but the smile froze, and she could only shake her head in silent helplessness. She, too, felt the barrier; it was as though a dead man stood between them with raised, forbidding hand.

"I know you will do your best," she said at last with an effort. "You saved him once before for my sake—perhaps you will save him now—and I thank you!"

"Will you never have more than thanks to give me, Nora?"

"The rest was given—years ago," she answered.

"And if I brought the dead back to you?" He hardly knew how the words came to his lips nor what they meant. It was perhaps an exclamation out of the bitterness of his soul, but it seemed to him as though a voice outside himself had spoken. He had scoffed at the vision of the night before, and yet it haunted him now; it seemed to sit in the secret places of his brain, to follow him like a silent, formless shadow. He knew now that it had never left him, that it would never leave him, that he was doomed, convicted by the dead who had not died. He looked at his wife. The colour had rushed for an instant to her pale cheeks; she shrank back, and he knew of whom she was thinking.

"That is something that even you cannot do!" she said.

She walked quickly past him, and this time he made no effort to detain her. He threw open the verandah window and passed out into the fresh morning air. Without any clear plan before him he yet felt possessed of some fine instinct which guided him away from the village, upwards among the mighty rocks surrounding the foot of the mountain to where the Grand Trou lay like a black stain amidst the dazzling snow. He walked rapidly and without hesitation. Now as ever the desire to succeed, to overcome every obstacle, goaded him to a supreme effort. At the bottom of his heart he instinctively disliked David, but to win her, to win her gratitude, her affection, he would have plunged into hell to save

the boy ; and to that purpose there was added something else—a vague, indefinable fear. Where had David gone, and why? What strange hallucination had urged him to face the lonely terrors of the night? Was there truth in the guide's wild tale? Was it possible that Heathcote haunted the scene of his own death—waiting for the hour of retribution? Rayner tried to laugh, but his throat was dry. Not even the broad daylight and cheerful sunshine could warm the cold fear which clutched at his heart like a ruthless, icy hand.

Gradually he left the village behind him. The thunder of the torrent grew louder in his ears, drowning his voice as he called David's name, and he strode on impatiently towards the rough swinging bridge which led across the foaming chaos fifty feet beneath. Half way across he stopped and looked down. As men in times of grave crisis think of the most trivial objects, so his thoughts wandered for the moment from the task he had set himself to accomplish. He thought how easy it would be for a man to fall, how easy it would be to loosen the frail structure of the bridge so that an enemy, unsuspecting of the death-trap, might be cast down to awful and certain destruction. He thrust the thought from him with a shudder. Ever since Heathcote's death he had been haunted by the same morbid fancies, and in his mind had committed a dozen crimes. Had he believed in such things he might have believed that remorse had chosen this form of torture. But he believed in nothing save his own will, his own unbreakable, in-

domitable will. Once more he strode on, his brows knitted, his lips compressed. The track had long since vanished, and he was climbing amidst rocks and crumbling debris, unconscious of the sun which blazed down from the cloudless sky. His movements were rapid and feverish, as though he were not only seeking but himself pursued by some invisible, silent enemy. Suddenly he stopped. His quick ears had caught the sound of rolling stones and then a shuffling movement as of someone laboriously scrambling down the mountain side.

"David!" he called. There was no answer, but the sounds drew nearer. "David!" he repeated. A minute later a shadow rose up from behind a boulder higher up, and David himself stood before him. For a moment—a curious long moment of suspense—neither spoke. The boy was deadly pale, his hand gripped the jagged rock as though for support, but his eyes were feverishly bright.

"Where have you been?" Rayner demanded. "What has happened to you?"

"I lost my way and waited for daybreak," the boy answered. "I hurt my foot as well, and could not go fast." He spoke in jerks, his voice sounded high and strained, as though he were struggling against some hysterical outburst.

"Come, I will help you!" Rayner said. His first emotion had been one of triumph. Again he had been the one to save the being she loved; she could not withhold her gratitude, and with gratitude would surely come the love for which he had fought with all

the strength of his character. David lifted his hand. His young, delicate face was convulsed with a hatred, a loathing which checked Rayner like a blow.

"Keep back!" he said between his teeth. "Keep back, you traitor! You scoundrel!"

Rayner stood thunderstruck, paralysed. The fear which had dogged his footsteps leapt upon him and gripped him with fangs of a horrible certainty. Inexplicable as it was, he read a knowledge in the other's blazing eyes which stunned him.

"Keep back from me!" the boy repeated, his voice rising higher in his excitement. "Let me alone!"

With an effort Rayner regained his outward composure.

"You are mad, David!" he said coolly. "You do not know what you are saying!"

The boy answered with a wild laugh.

"Am I mad, too?" he said, bending forward and pointing with his thin finger. "Are you going to curse me as you cursed poor Heathcote?"

Rayner did not know it—the accusation had been conceived of a vague, terrible suspicion, and had burst into being in a moment of passionate hatred. Rayner saw only the accusatory hand, the blazing eyes; he heard in the words a certainty which left him no escape. Involuntarily he took a step backwards, as though the threatening gaze burnt him.

"What do you mean?" he stammered. "Are you raving?"

His voice, his face, betrayed him. In that moment of unguarded terror the mask which he had held

before his face for two long years with unwavering steadfastness fell. David Munro drew himself erect, and his hand clenched itself above his head.

"You are a murderer!" he said passionately. "There is blood on your hands—Heathcote's life, Nora's life, is ruined by your devilish treachery! Let me pass! Don't come near me! I believe I should have the strength to kill you!"

Rayner barred his path. He made no attempt at denial or defence. Something—perhaps the unacknowledged spectre of retribution—had shattered his nerve, his presence of mind, and he stood there like an animal brought to bay, mad with the instinct of self-preservation.

"Where are you going?" he demanded. "What are you going to do?"

"I am going to Nora!" was the answer. "I am going to tell her the whole truth—I am going to see if there is no justice on earth for such as you!"

"You young fool! You have no proof—the dead do not come back!"

"The dead have risen!" David answered, as he thrust his antagonist aside with a strength that seemed incredible. "The dead have risen, Edgar Rayner! Look to yourself!"

Rayner staggered against the rocks behind him. He felt himself turn sick and faint; the earth, shimmering beneath the noonday sun, reeled before his eyes.

"David—in pity's name——!" he called wildly. But there was no answer. With an agility which seemed

almost superhuman, David had scrambled down the rocks and had already disappeared, and only the rolling of loose stones and the roar of the distant torrent broke the deathlike stillness. Rayner dragged himself upright. By what unearthly, terrible power he had been betrayed he did not know, nor did he try to think. He felt himself pursued, haunted by a spectre which mocked at every desperate plan. Nora, his future, his whole life, lay wrecked by his own self-betrayal. From the moment that David reached the valley he was lost, from that moment there was no hope more! When David reached the valley! The words repeated themselves in his throbbing brain. It seemed to him that he had heard them somewhere before—when he had stood on the frail bridge watching the churning waters beneath. Supposing David never reached the valley—supposing an accident happened? No one would ever know! It was madness—the dead never rise, never return. It was his one chance—his one hope. With rapid, desperate eyes he looked about him. He was alone in the majestic wilderness of rock and snow. There was no one to see, no one to betray this last act in the long chain of evil which he had woven about him. A few yards to the left a smooth ledge of rock ran straight down the face of the mountain, past the Grand Trou towards the bridge. It was dangerous, but he was desperate, and only by a short cut could he hope to reach the bridge before David. When he had reached it, it would only be the work of a moment to loosen the cords, to fray them so that the

slightest strain—— He thought no further. His heart sickened before the picture which imagination conjured up before him, but his brain worked as coolly and steadily as it had done in that first hour of temptation.

And now, as then, it was Nora who stood before him, the woman for whose love he had staked his soul—as yet in vain. In vain! The very thought of failure shattered the last faint resistance of his better self. Without hesitation he covered the short distance which separated him from the ledge. At another time he might have hung back, have wavered at the sight of the yawning chasm beneath him, but his imagination saw nothing but David drawing nearer and nearer to safety; he saw his wife's face as the truth was revealed to her, and in his heart there was nothing left but a deadly, pitiless purpose. Thus, with a cat-like agility, he crawled along the surface of the rock, clinging to the slightest projection, avoiding the treacherous footholds, as though guided by a miraculous instinct. Fate was with him, he thought; and once again, something that was like a sombre triumph rose up beneath his desperation. After all, it was his will which conquered. Even the dead had risen in vain against him. And then, suddenly, he screamed out like a frightened woman, and his grip upon the rock relaxed. The dead had indeed risen before him. In the centre of his path stood the man he had betrayed.

VII

RETRIBUTION

For a long minute after that one shrill cry of terror no sound broke the absolute petrified silence. Rayner had regained his balance by an instinctive effort, and now stood with his back against the slippery rock, his lips parted, his eyes fixed in a glassy stare on the motionless figure before him. His nerve was gone. He knew himself lost beyond salvation, and whether it was reality or a hallucination which had risen out of the grave to confront him he had no power to struggle further. He had no thought now of David nor of the future. The present had him in its grip. The one idea which filled his reeling brain was to escape from this—this horrible pursuing phantom of retribution. He tried to turn, to retrace his footsteps, but his limbs refused their office. He could not take his eyes away from the colourless face before him, he could bring no sound over his lips. Thus the minutes passed. The sunken, gleaming eyes never flinched from their soul-searching stare. The frightful pertinacity of that scrutiny drove Rayner to madness.

"Heathcote!" he cried. "Heathcote—don't look at me like that! Are you of the dead or of the living? Heathcote—in Heaven's name——"

No answer. The colourless face retained its haggard inflexibility, no muscle betrayed that the frantic appeal had reached living ears. Rayner moistened his cracking lips. Little by little his self-

possession was returning and terror giving place to the recklessness of despair. He drew one wavering uncertain step nearer, and stretched out his hand. It touched warm flesh, and he knew that it was no phantom, but the man himself. Strangely enough, the knowledge brought with it a stranger, more inexplicable fear. There was something in the stony, impenetrable gaze which froze his blood. He tried to smile, to hold out his hand in welcome, but his hand shook as though with paralysis, and the smile became a grimace of agony.

"Why, Heathcote," he said, "what a shock you gave me, old fellow. I thought—I thought you were dead—the accident, you know. What has happened to you?"

No answer. Heathcote had not moved, his eyes had not for an instant wavered. Rayner put his hand to his forehead. It was clammy with hysterical fear.

"Heathcote—for God's sake, don't look like that! Let me pass! I must go!"

The same unbroken, relentless quiet. Rayner's voice rose to a smothered scream.

"Let me pass, I say! What do you want of me? Is it revenge you want? Why should you want revenge? What have I done to you? I told you the truth—I did what I thought was right—it was for Nora's happiness!" The defiance, the stubborn self-vindication broke down before the other's silence. "Heathcote, have mercy, have mercy! I loved her—you know what I am—I have never let anyone

come between me and my will—it was a moment's temptation and—and I yielded. Can't you understand? You were my friend, but for months you had been fighting, unseen, against me. I did not know it, but it was you who stood between us, and then when I knew—hate got the better of me. I had to win, and you gave me the chance—you made it so easy. Be generous! Remember the old days! Forget—forgive!”

He was pleading for his life, and he knew it, although Heathcote had neither moved nor spoken.

“Forgive!” he repeated desperately. “You can't kill me in cold blood! We were friends——”

Heathcote laughed. The sound echoed through the stillness, more awful than the wildest curse, and Rayner shrank back, cringing against the rocky wall as though from some unseen enemy.

“Heathcote!” he stammered.

The other bent towards him.

“Don't you see—I am mad?” he said in a whisper.

Rayner tried to answer. His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth, but his eyes, trained as they were, rested on Heathcote's face with a new and terrible understanding. But he fought against the truth as a man fights against the stream which is bearing him to destruction.

“Heathcote—don't be a fool! It was a mistake. Macarthy was mad himself when he told you that—he was crazed on that one point, and I—I lied to you. You know why. Good God, man, you are as sane as I am! Pull yourself together—don't give way to it—don't

you understand? It was a mistake—a lie——” He almost shrieked the words in his despair. And then came the same quiet, terrible laugh.

“I am mad—raving mad. Don’t you see it? It has followed me night and day, creeping closer with every hour. And now it is sitting here—here——” He clasped his head with a gesture of agony. “Here, here, I tell you. It grins and gapes at me—it mocks at me—and it has your face!”

“Heathcote—it isn’t true! You are sane—your nerves have broken down—your imagination has got the better of you. Can’t you hear what I say? Can’t you understand?”

“I tell you, it is here!” Heathcote repeated hoarsely. “I have felt it coming—and now it is there—right in the centre of my brain. But it shan’t win! I shall kill it—I shall crush it down—so!”

He had drawn step by step nearer, and step by step Rayner recoiled along the narrow, treacherous path behind him. He no longer reasoned—he knew that it was useless. The man before him was not mad but in the grip of a hideous delirium, the result of a long and awful torture which he himself had inflicted. At another time Rayner might have turned and out-distanced his pursuer, but now he could neither think nor act. He, too, was in the grip of a fiend who gibed at his helplessness. It was as though Nemesis had at last overtaken him and was breaking him on the wheel of her pitiless justice. Not the dead had risen, but his own crime, and it was tracking him down inch by inch. The path, earth, and sky

had vanished. He saw nothing but the wild, distraught face before him. His breath was coming in thick, heavy groans, his fingers slid weakly over the rock, his knees shook. And then suddenly the end came. He took a false step. As in a nightmare he saw the frightful void beneath him, and then in a moment's instinctive appeal he flung out his arms.

"Heathcote—old fellow——" It was a cry from a time long past, from a stainless, cloudless boyhood, when they had wandered together through the College cloisters, when they had fought their battles shoulder to shoulder and dreamed their dreams. "Heathcote—old fellow—save me!"

It was all over in a fraction of a second. Like a flash of lightning through the darkness Heathcote's face lit up, the awful frozen delirium broke. A light of recognition flashed into his burning eyes. Even as he cried out, Rayner saw a hand stretch towards him. He gripped it frantically, scarcely knowing if it came to save or to destroy, but it was too late. For an instant he caught a last glimpse of sky and mountains—then all vanished, and he sank back into a gulf of silence.

VIII

RESCUE

The evening shadows had already begun to darken the valley as Nora entered the chalet garden. Her hands were torn and bleeding, her clothes stained with the day's hard climbing, and her pale face bore

traces of something more than physical exhaustion. She looked anxiously about her. All was quiet and silent. There was no trace of her husband or David; the place seemed deserted, and a profound loneliness, a numbing despair, crept into her heart. What if David had also gone out of her life; what if she must face life alone with the man who was at heart a stranger to her? Had her sacrifice been after all a sin, and was this the punishment? She thought of the vision of the night before, of the face which for an instant had been turned to her in the grey moonlight. Was that also a punishment, or was it a warning of the evil that was to come?

Instinctively she turned, as though expecting to find the phantom figure at her side, and a low stifled exclamation escaped her lips. Someone stood in the shadow, a bent old man, who came towards her with an awkward, hasty movement of apology.

"Who are you?" she demanded, her voice sharp with suspense. "Have you brought news?"

He looked up at her, his furrowed face full of doubt and trouble.

"I am the guide Alexander," he said, "and I have brought news."

"Of whom—my brother?"

"No—of a friend."

"A friend?" she echoed.

"Yes, I have kept my promise long enough—longer than I should have done. Since that day when I answered your questions I have known that you are the woman for whom he sacrificed himself,

and I should have spoken—God forgive me, I should have spoken. Madame, there was no accident two years ago. I lied—because he asked me—because he had once saved my life—I lied—he honoured me with his trust and——”

He stopped—struck silent by the look which had come into her eyes.

“My God—you mean——”

“Madame, your friend was not killed. He hid himself in the mountains, and only I knew his secret. Perhaps I should have kept it to the end, but now I must speak. Since last night I cannot find him—his hut is empty—the storm is coming, and I can find him no more!” His voice rose to a piteous, feeble wail, and he pointed to the cold white peaks with a hand that trembled. “There it was he lived. He believed himself under a curse of madness, and waited death among the mountains he loved, and now—Mother of God—perhaps it has found him at last!”

Nora stood there motionless, as though she had been turned to stone. As though a veil had been torn from her eyes, she understood. She knew now whence had come the strange unrest, the stranger fancies which had haunted her night and day, throughout the two long years. She knew now why his face had stood between her and all other love. He had been alive, and her heart had known it. And then she remembered his face as she had seen it the night before—full of an unutterable fear and anguish, and side by side with her pity there arose

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the irresistible tide of a love which she had never conquered. In that moment she did not think of the curse which rested upon his life nor of the mystery which surrounded him. She forgot all else in the one purpose—to save him, to bring him back, cost what it might. With a resolute step she went towards the gate and out on to the road.

"Tell me where he might be found," she said. "I must go to him—now—at once."

"Madame, it is impossible. Night is coming on—and he is lost. I have searched for him all this day. Think of the danger—it is madness."

"I must," she said. "Something tells me it must be to-night or never. Quick—get help—bring the best guides that will come, we must—we shall find him!"

Suddenly she stood still. Something was coming towards them—a shadow, which seemed to waver in the fantastic light—a figure which the next moment she recognised with a cry of thankfulness.

"David!" she exclaimed. "David!" She caught him in her arms as he reeled towards her, but with a last effort he held himself erect.

"There is no time to be lost," he gasped. "I have crawled the whole way—my foot is strained—and God knows what has happened since this morning. Nora, Heathcote is alive!"

"I know!" she answered. "I know!"

"You can't know all. He has hidden himself all these months because Edgar lied to him—as he has lied to you. And now they have met. I saw them

face to face on the ledge above the Grand Trou—I don't know what happened, but they fell—and now——” His voice broke. “Quick! Perhaps there is still hope—only go, go before it is too late!”

Without a word she half guided, half carried him to the chalet steps. Then she turned and came back to where the guide waited her.

“Come!” she said quietly.

“Madame, you cannot—you are exhausted—the danger is too great—a storm is rising——”

She looked gravely and resolutely into the old weather-beaten face.

“You cared for him,” she said. “Would you not give your life to save him?”

“Madame, I am old—what little life I have left I would give willingly.”

A smile passed over her pale features.

“And I am young, and would give all I have,” she said gently. “Will you not come now?”

He made no answer, but followed her. Above them towered the mountain peaks, and from the south the first gust of the Föhn blew cold against their faces. She thought of those exposed to the hurricane upon the open mountain—of the man she loved with a love too strong to be denied—and her heart sank with despair.

IX

AT THE END

Amidst the wailing of the rising storm and the rattle and thunder of rocks loosened by the force of the gale, Rayner drifted back from the shadows of oblivion. For a moment he lay quiet, scarcely knowing if the confusion of the elements existed only in his aching brain, or were reality. Then the incidents of his last conscious moments flashed back like a lightning picture, and he dragged himself hastily upright as though the horror of it still pursued him. He could see nothing, an absolute inky darkness surrounded him; the glacial wind cut against his face, driving with it fragments of stone and frozen snow, and in the distance the torrent roared persistently above the howl of the tempest. He stretched out his hand. A smothered groan of physical pain escaped his lips, and then he sat still, his teeth clenched. For a full five minutes he remained motionless, then an avalanche of stones rattling down the mountain side within a few feet of where he lay aroused him to action. He began to grope about him, crawling painfully forward on his knees, his hand feeling through the driving clouds whose thick breath he felt against his cheek. Suddenly his hand passed out into the void, and he stopped short, drawing back an instant later with a shudder from the unseen gulf which yawned before him. He knew now that a rocky projection had broken his fall, that Fate had once more stretched out a miraculous,

saving hand. He crept cautiously backwards. He brushed against something—something that was warm and stirred with a smothered groan of pain, and then once more he sat motionless, paralysed by the shock of recollection. His enemy, the man whom he had betrayed and who in turn had dogged him to the edge of death, lay at his side, alive, perhaps unhurt—and beneath was the abyss, silent, impenetrable, its bottomless darkness seeming to hold out the promise of eternal secrecy. Cautiously Rayner drew nearer, fighting against the wind which hurled itself against him in unrestrained fury. He could see nothing, but his practised hands glided over Heathcote's face to his heart, where they paused in tense suspense. He counted the pulsation—it was regular and quiet; the hands, which lay limply in his, were cool and fresh as a child's—only there was something wet about the forehead—a thin, sluggish stream which Rayner recognised with a curious thrill of professional pride. A head wound then—no more than that—and the delirium broken. In half an hour or less he would recover consciousness and then—Rayner drew back shuddering against the wall of rock behind him. The cold seemed to be increasing in its bitterness; it cut through him, and entered into his blood, freezing his heart to stone. But his mind was now clear, his thoughts had become horribly lucid. And again it was as though a voice close beside him whispered to him and the whisper rose above the howl of the tempest. Supposing he never recovered consciousness? One push and it would be all over. And who

then would believe David's tale? How easy it would be to silence suspicion with an explanation of overstrained nerves, delicate health, and the suggestion of painful surroundings! As a doctor, how easy it would be for him! Then he would be safe. The dead would haunt him no more—the intangible barrier between Nora and himself destroyed for ever. And had he not the right? Had not Heathcote tried to kill him? He stretched out his hand, nerving himself for the final effort. The wind dropped suddenly. It seemed to his excited fancy as though all Nature waited in breathless suspense—and then he cried out shrilly. For one instant the dense rolling clouds had thinned, and a ray of sickly, stormy light fell on the ledge where they lay, and on Heathcote's face. His eyes were open, and he was smiling.

"Hullo, Rayner!" he said faintly. "Hullo, old fellow! What has happened?"

Rayner's hand fell powerless to his side. For the space of a second, angel and devil fought for the mastery in his tortured soul. Then he stretched out his hand again and laid it gently on Heathcote's shoulder.

"Stay quiet!" he said. "We have fallen on a ledge, and must wait for daybreak or until help comes. There is not a foot between you and destruction, We have been saved by a miracle."

He had as yet no plan, no thought of what was to come. He only knew that he could do nothing whilst Heathcote's eyes rested on his face.

"What has happened?" Heathcote repeated con-

fusedly. "Everything is a blank. How did we come together?"

"You remember—nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Don't you remember how we met—nor what I told you?"

"No, no. What did you tell me?"

"I—told you that I had lied to you—two years ago—that I had wilfully deceived you for my own ends. I wanted you out of the way, and Macarthy's own madness gave me my chance. I confirmed his verdict—I lied." He hardly recognised his own voice. The Föhn had once more risen in all its former fury, and his words seemed to be caught up and thrust back to him. But they were spoken without his will, almost without his knowledge.

"And then——?" The question left Heathcote's lips with a curious accent of fear. It was as though from the secret places of his memory a vague, formless recollection was struggling up towards the light. "And then——?"

Rayner was silent. For a moment he sat thinking—of a woman's face.

"And then——" he said slowly, mechanically—"I stumbled—and you stretched out your hand——"

"To save you—or to kill you?"

A short, tense silence. Rayner still thought of the woman's face—and then of David and of the bridge.

"Yes—to save me."

"Thank God."

The darkness hid them from each other. Rayner

leant back against the wall. He was breathing hard, like a man who has run a hard and desperate race.

"Heathcote—what have you to say to me? Why don't you curse me?"

An icy hand groped towards him and held his arm.

"Old chap—it isn't likely that we shall hold out through this night. The cold is in my blood already. You were my friend—I—I forgive——"

His voice died away in the roar of the storm. His head sank back. With an effort Rayner drew him closer; he held him in his arms, he chafed his hands.

"Heathcote—drink this! It's brandy—quick!"

"No, no, keep it yourself. You—you are her husband."

"Heathcote, she loves you! Drink, there is enough for us both." He placed the flask to Heathcote's lips. "Drink!" he repeated masterfully. Heathcote yielded. The burning liquid flowed through his frozen veins. His head sank back wearily against Rayner's shoulder.

"Thanks, old fellow, thanks!"

Neither spoke again. The storm died away in the distance, and the first flake of snow drifted against Rayner's face. Gently he laid his sleeping companion on the ground, and drawing off his coat wrapped it about him. With the last drop from the flask he moistened the parted lips. Then he, too, lay down with his arms about Heathcote's shoulder, and so awaited the dawn.

So also the rescue-party found them, as the first grey sunlight broke through the drifting mists. A thin layer of snow lay about them, and on the figure of the man who had fallen across Heathcote's breast, as though in a last effort to protect and shelter him. Both men were still, but Rayner did not answer when they called him. On a torn piece of paper clenched in his frozen hand they found the scrawled words "To my wife—as atonement—" but no more. Death had torn the unsteady pencil from his fingers, and only Nora understood the unfinished sentence. She bent over him, and drew him gently aside. As she did so Heathcote's eyes opened.

"Nora!" he whispered. She held him in her warm arms, and a great silence fell between them, as though the unspoken suffering and longing of the years concentrated itself in that moment. They had no need of words. Instinctively each knew that the other understood, and that the long mystery was cleared at last. Then he saw Rayner's quiet figure, the coat and empty flask, and a cry of grief and horror escaped his lips.

"He gave his life for me!" he said huskily. "Nora—and I never knew!" He staggered to his feet, but Nora held him gently back. She bent down and kissed the cold, peaceful forehead.

"He has atoned!" she whispered; and when she looked at him again it seemed to her that a smile hovered about his lips.

THE DEBT

I

GENERAL VON HALBACH stood with his back turned on his visitor and stared out of the window into the broad courtyard with an expression that was a mixture of cynical amusement and anger. He was a tall, well-built man, remarkably young-looking for his years and position, and handsome enough, one would have supposed, to have caused agitation in many a susceptible woman's heart. But for many years at least no heart had beaten faster on the general's account. Possibly his expression, which, like himself, was cold, harsh, and pitiless, kept men and women alike on the other side of a barrier which hitherto had never been scaled. He stood alone, the cleverest officer in the Prussian army, but nevertheless, of his own free will and choice, entirely alone.

Kurt von Bodenstein watched him anxiously. On the general's next words hung fate and happiness, not of himself alone, but of one other who was still dearer to him. The courage and cheerful certainty with which that same afternoon he had dressed himself in full uniform had frozen into a feeling nearly

akin to despair. There was something in the elder man's attitude which left little room for hope.

"Your request is nothing new or surprising," General von Halbach said at last without, however, looking round. "I have seen it coming for a long time, and—I confess—regretted it."

"That means——" Kurt began.

"That means very little," was the stern interruption.

"There have been many things in my life which I have regretted and not been able to prevent. But enough of that. You wish to marry my daughter. That, I understand, is the sum total of your long speech?" The young officer winced under the mockery, but answered, without hesitation:

"That is my wish, Herr General." The general came back to the table, and, folding his arms, studied his visitor's features with an icy penetration which was hard to withstand.

"Have you thoroughly considered the step you propose taking?" he asked. "You are a promising officer, already on my staff and with a future before you. Why do you wish to burden yourself with a wife?"

"My wife, if she is the one I pray for, will be my comrade, not my burden," was the bold answer. The general laughed unpleasantly.

"So you think, Herr Lieutenant. Permit me to tell you that every young fool thinks that of the woman he marries, and goes on thinking it until he finds out, too late, that she is an empty, heartless, faithless toy whom he has bound to himself for life.

But, of course, you will not be influenced by the experience of others."

Kurt von Bodenstein made no answer. He knew that to do so would be worse than useless, though his sense of chivalry burned hot against the brutal criticism. His silence was effective enough, however, for after a moment the general went on in a tone of resignation not unmingled with contempt: "I see you are more stupid than I thought you were. The matter must be proceeded with." He seated himself, and taking up some papers, removed his piercing gaze for the first time from the strained, anxious face opposite him. "You are aware, Herr Lieutenant, that before the Emperor gives his consent to the marriage of any of his officers he must be assured that the officer in question is in a position to support his wife according to her rank. In your case, the sum which you must guarantee to have in your possession will be 40,000 marks. Have you so much money?"

Kurt von Bodenstein's lips tightened into a straight line.

"I am very sorry to say—no," he began with an effort, "but I hope——"

"You hope that I will play the part of Providence?" interrupted the other sharply. "You are, at any rate, of a sanguine disposition." To this also Kurt made no answer. Perhaps some such expectation had lingered at the back of his mind, though he would never have acknowledged it. "Let me at once destroy any air-castles which you may have been building," the general went on, coolly tying up a

bundle of papers and sealing them. "I am not of the popular, good-natured calibre. I do not intend to help you. Nor do I intend that my daughter should endure the horrors of a long engagement, during which you would be begging round your relations for the required sum. My ultimatum, therefore, is this: In a fortnight you bring me the written guarantee, or the matter is definitely at an end between you and Hertha."

For the first time an uncontrollable exclamation of protest burst from the younger man.

"It is not possible, Herr General," he said. "Your conditions amount to a refusal. I feel now that you are against me." The general's busy hands sank for a moment idly on the table. His brows were knitted, but more with a vague perplexity than anger.

"Against you?" he repeated thoughtfully. "Perhaps I am, though I hardly know why. I do not dislike you—rather the contrary. Nevertheless, I admit that something about you—your name or your appearance—reminds me—has unpleasant associations."

"Then there is no hope?"

"Not unless some extraordinary good fortune comes to your assistance."

Kurt von Bodenstein drew himself up with a hard effort at self-control, his pride forcing him to hide the extent of his pain from that cold, cynical scrutiny.

"Permit me, then, to take my leave, Herr General," he said, saluting. The other man nodded, and allowed him to reach the door before he called him back.

"In the affairs of the heart we must not forget the

affairs of the nation," he said ironically. "Kindly take these papers with you. I have sealed them, though they are *not of much importance*. *They contain the secret plans of mobilisation in case of war*, and I shall be glad if you would copy them out and test the statistics. Return them to me in a fortnight's time—together, I trust, with the guarantee." Something very closely resembling hatred sprang up in the younger man and shone out of his miserable eyes. Long and stern discipline prevented any other sign, and with another salute he left the room, the papers tucked carefully in his tunic.

He passed out of the courtyard and into the busy street. Absorbed as he was in his own black and hopeless outlook, he scarcely noticed those that passed him. Habit alone made him lift his hand mechanically to his helmet in answer to the greetings of his brother officers, for he neither recognised uniforms nor faces. At the corner of the Kaiser Allee he was arrested by a smart tap on the shoulder, and turning, found a short, stout, floridly-dressed gentleman at his side.

"Here's a bit of good luck!" his new companion exclaimed after Kurt had somewhat reluctantly shaken hands. "I've been looking for you all over the place. We're giving a little party this evening, and, of course, you'll be there. What would my Katherinchen do without her baron, eh, you sly dog?" He squeezed Bodenstein's arm playfully, but the latter drew back with a troubled flush.

"Don't be a fool, Cohn," he said. "That's all over, you know. In fact, it never was anything."

"Well, well, we'll let sleeping dogs lie," the other returned. "But you'll come?"

"Thanks, no. You play too high for me. I can't afford it. I'm in the devil of a mess as it is. If I can't raise 40,000 marks in a fortnight I'm done for—at any rate, in one sense."

The man Cohn clapped him on the shoulder.

"Why, it's the very thing!" he exclaimed. "How do you suppose you're going to raise 40,000 marks, you, a poor lieutenant who can hardly make the ends meet as it is? Going to save it out of your pay, eh? Come, you can't expect Fate to run after you all along the road. Give her a helping hand."

Kurt looked at him doubtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"Come to us this evening and try your luck. We play high, as you say, and a few evenings' run of good luck and there are 40,000 marks to hand and you can stop. What do you say?" Bodenstein stood suddenly still in the middle of the street. His pulses began to beat with something that was unlike himself, something wild, reckless, and desperate. Hitherto a sense of duty, a recognition, too, of his own weakness had held him aloof from all temptation. Now, though common sense raised a dying protest, he could not stifle the thought: "Why not? As the general said, only good luck can help me. It's my only chance—and I can't—I can't lose her without an effort. Perhaps fortune—just this once!" Fatal supposition! He turned his flushed face to the man beside him.

"All right!" he said hoarsely, "I'll come!"

II

There is one scene in the serio-comic play of everyday life which, above all others, fascinates the pen of the novelist and the brush of the painter. It is not a beautiful scene, there is much about it that is sordid and repulsive, but it fascinates, nevertheless, because it shows in the space of one small canvas, as it were, a wonderful complex mingling of character and the whole scale of human passion. This scene has a green-cloth card table for its centre. Blatant triumph, placid satisfaction, calm resignation, ill-restrained despair sit at the four corners and watch the cards, which are finally to seal their fate, drop in turn before them. Rarely, however, is it the sad privilege of a novelist or painter to catch a glimpse of a loser whose despair was so intense and outlook so hopeless as that of Kurt von Bodenstein. His last card was played, his last gold piece had long since been swallowed up in the pile of the man beside him, and now he flung himself back in his chair and stared through the green baize into a world of ruin. Opposite him sat Calm Resignation in the form of a young and pretty girl who re-shuffled the cards, ticked off the amount of her losses on a piece of paper, and occasionally smiled across at her partner with an air of whimsical, not very deep distress.

"We've had bad luck together, Herr Baron," she said at last as he remained unresponsive. "What do you say to a revenge?" The young officer started and passed his unsteady hand over his forehead.

"No," he said harshly. "Not to-night—I can't. I'm tired and have had enough." Then with a strong effort he pulled himself together and addressed the man on his right. "If you wouldn't mind adding up what I owe you, Herr Cohn, I should be obliged," he said. "I have lost count—my head aches so." The gentleman, who bore traces of Oriental descent, nodded, stuck his cigar in the corner of his mouth, and proceeded with some calculations in a note-book, which, when they were brought to a satisfactory conclusion, he tore out and pushed across the table.

"There, my dear young friend," he said. "If you run your eye over that you will see that, what with last night's play and to-night's, the amount reaches 30,560 marks. I hope I haven't made any mistake."

Kurt von Bodenstein set his teeth hard. The flush of excitement died out of the handsome face, leaving him white to the lips.

"Thank you," he said, with an attempt at indifference. "I haven't the money with me; I suppose an I.O.U. will do, won't it?" Herr Cohn's thick eyebrows went up with dubious consideration.

"Cash down is my principle at the table," he said. "Still, as you're an old friend, I don't mind stretching the point again. All right, make it for this day week, will you?"

"This day week!" Kurt echoed, scribbling down the acknowledgment. Then, with a short laugh which sounded more like a groan, he stumbled to his feet, and going to the mantelpiece, stood with his back towards the company, his head resting on his

hand in an attitude of weary despair. The two men, who were evidently brothers, winked at each other, and went, arm in arm, into the adjoining room. Thence came the sound of laughter, singing, the popping of champagne bottles, and the clink of glasses. Only the girl remained behind. She stood by the table, her head bowed, her fingers playing idly with the scattered cards. The figure by the mantelpiece remained motionless, apparently ignorant of her presence. After a moment's hesitation, she pushed the cards on one side, and, crossing the room, put her hand with an impulsive gesture on the broad shoulder.

"Is it so bad as all that, arme junger?" she said in a tone of good-humoured comradeship. "Come, cheer up! You'll manage things somehow." He stared at her with haggard, sunken eyes.

"It isn't possible," he said. "I've lost every penny I ever had. Those 30,560 marks might just as well be as many millions as far as I am concerned."

"Tell your mother," she suggested. He shook his head.

"I'd shoot myself first. And she'd rather I did, too! Oh, she's a good mother, but as proud as Lucifer. Besides, she has suffered enough. My father was like me, I fancy, a senseless, useless scamp." He smiled bitterly. "No, I'll spare her this extra burden."

"But there is nothing else for you to do." There was a moment's pause. Something passed over his face, an expression that was partly of doubt, trouble, and vague hope.

"I don't know," he said at last.

"You don't know! That means there is something else?"

"Perhaps." Her hand slipped from his shoulder.

"You had better tell your mother," she insisted. There was a trouble and anxiety in her voice which, in his own trouble, he did not notice.

"I can't, I tell you!" he repeated impatiently. "She is poor, like all of us. And, besides, she would not understand. She is so cold. I think her heart and sympathy died years ago." There was a moment's silence. The girl's eyes were fixed on him with pitying concern.

"I'd ask my father to let you off," she said at last, "but I'm afraid it's no good. He is a hard nut to crack, as you know. There's only one man in the world he'd do it for." She paused nervously.

"And who may that be?" he asked, hardly listening to her.

"My husband." For an instant he said nothing. Then, as her meaning grew clear to him, he swung on his heel and stared into her face—a pretty face enough, though marred already by the Oriental coarseness which was to increase with the years.

"You mean——!" he burst into a wild laugh. "Is that what you mean? I'm to marry you to get out of this mess? Are you mad? Don't you know—don't you understand——?"

"I know and understand everything," she interrupted with a cold bitterness. "Do you think I want to buy myself a husband who would have to give up

his position to marry me and who would despise and hate me all his life? I know that I am of a hated and despised race. No, it's not that. I was sorry, and wanted to help you—that's all."

"Forgive me," he said brokenly. "I'm a brute and a cur, and you're worth twenty of my sort. But there's someone else—though she's lost now, whatever happens." She sighed.

"Don't lose hope," she said. "And—and keep straight." At that moment the younger Cohn entered the room, and she drew quickly back as though anxious that they should not be seen together. "Herr von Bodenstein is going, uncle," she said. "I will see that a cab is ordered for him."

"Don't do that, Mädel," was the smooth answer. "If the Herr Baron will allow me, I will accompany him a little way. He and I have some business to talk over." He went out, and Bodenstein would have followed, but the girl came and caught him by the arm.

"Mind!" she whispered. "Tell your mother—and keep straight!" He pressed her hand, grateful for her sympathy, though not for her advice, the latter part of which he did not even understand, and went out, closing the door after him.

The evening had ended early, play having been begun at three o'clock that afternoon, and a grey, winter twilight still hung over the town. For a few minutes the two men walked silently side by side. Then, at the door of a quiet restaurant, Cohn came to a standstill.

"Let's turn in here and drink something together," he suggested. "We shall be able to talk more undisturbed."

Bodenstein nodded an indifferent assent. The atmosphere of the place was heavy with the smell of beer and smoke, and he longed for fresh air to drive away the fumes of confusion and despair which still clouded his mind. But he had no power to protest, and they seated themselves at one of the dirty round tables. Cohn, for his part, ordered a quarter of the best Münchener with all the appearance of a man thoroughly enjoying himself.

"Gesundheit! Herr Baron!" he said, drinking to his companion out of the foaming glass.

Kurt von Bodenstein made a gesture of impatience.

"You wrote, saying you wished to speak with me," he said. "Pray let me know what you have to say. My time is short."

Cohn leant over the table, and laid a greasy finger on Kurt's sleeve.

"I wish to speak with you because I know you are in trouble," he said in an emphatic undertone. "I venture to take an interest in you, Herr Baron, and it is my ambition to help you out of your difficulties."

"You!" exclaimed the young man incredulously.

"Yes, I. You are deep in debt to my brother. You cannot pay him. You are seeking also a sum of money in order to marry. You have a mother, by the way, who is not likely to have much sympathy with your dilemma."

"How dare you!" burst out Kurt, bringing his hand down angrily on the table. The Jew smiled.

"I only wish to show you that I was quite *au courant* as regards your affairs, my dear friend," he said. There was a moment's silence, in which the young officer sank once more into his lethargical despair. He was too overwhelmed even to resent his companion's familiarity, and it was Cohn who resumed the conversation. "Let us judge the situation calmly," he observed. "A man standing on the verge of ruin and—er—disgrace, sells the most valuable thing he has. That is what you must do."

"I have nothing on this earth——" Kurt began, but the other cut him short with a contemptuous wave of the hand.

"Don't be so sure," he said. "Come, I will be open with you. I have a friend, a very rich friend, who takes an immense interest in all military matters. One might almost call him a crank. I know for certain that he would give—well, a large sum for a little information which I have no doubt you could give."

Bodenstein started. "Information!" he muttered.

"Yes, information. For instance," he leant forward and touched Kurt's heavy overcoat, "I see you carry some papers with you. You were going to the general's this evening, were you not? Well, doubtless these papers have no value, yet my friend would give 80,000 marks for a week's use of them." He broke into a loud laugh. "Do you know, my dear Bodenstein, when I saw them in your pocket this afternoon—I must explain, I mistook your over-

coat for mine—I nearly stole them. But I did not. I chose the honest policy, as you see." His small, beady eyes twinkled up at the young man, who had staggered to his feet.

"Heavens!" he exclaimed wildly. "What a hopeless, unforgivable fool I have been!"

Cohn nodded. "You have not been very wise," he admitted. "But then you are young. Perhaps that excuses you."

"You have trapped me," Kurt said, looking at him with bitter contempt. "You and your whole family have spun a web round me. But I'll get through. Somehow I must and will!"

Cohn caught him by the arm. A dark frown had changed the insolent good-nature into insolent menace.

"Don't shout so!" he said in a savage whisper. "Do you want the whole world to know that you're a bankrupt, gambler, and heaven knows what besides? Hold your tongue and be sensible. You can't escape. I tell you that straight. You dare not appeal to your mother. You have no money—and if you don't pay—well, I should be sorry to have to go to General von Halbach on the subject. Do you remember the Emperor's last Cabinet Order? Any officer who is discovered gambling will be punished with dismissal from the army." Kurt put his hand to his dazed and aching head. "Come!" expostulated Cohn with recovered equanimity. "Look at things in the right light. Mobilisation plans—what are they? They are changed from year to year. You

know very well that they would not have been entrusted to you, a young officer, if they had had any value. Their only value could be in time of war and in the hands of the enemy. And there's no prospect of war, and I'm not an enemy. I'm a good German, that's what I am." He laughed thickly. "You shall have the papers back in a week's time. The general won't want them, and if he does you can easily put him off with some excuse. Come, 80,000 marks is a fancy price for a thing that isn't worth sixpence to anyone but a crank. With so much money you could pay your debts and win the girl. Come, don't be a fool!" A long, painful silence ensued. Slowly, with a hand that shook as if with the palsy, Kurt drew the sealed papers from his pocket.

"There!" he muttered, and, flinging himself down by the table, buried his face in his hands. From that fatal moment his brain began to clear. He began to trace out the long sequence of inevitable results. His soldier's conscience cried out at him in fierce reproach, and the spell which had hitherto held all inherited and acquired sense of honour paralysed broke and set it free. It was a terrible awakening. When he at last looked up, moved by a late repentance, he found that he was alone and that a roll of notes lay at his elbow.

III

In a room on the second floor of a house situated in the outskirts of the town two women sat by the

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window and watched and waited. The dusk had already set in and hid behind its kindly cloak much that was shabby and patched and worn in the little apartment. The furniture, remnants for the most part of a brighter past, gained back something of its one-time splendour in the dim, half light, through which the most curious eye would have failed to trace the wear and tear of time. All that was clear and definite were the two faces on which fell the flickering reflection from a street lamp. There was no resemblance between the two women, though from their respective ages they might well have been mother and daughter. Of the two the elder was the more handsome. The finely-chiselled features were almost perfect in their aristocratic outline, the large eyes had in their expression a noble dignity, and though years and sorrow had left their traces and touched with their grey fingers the dark, curly hair, they had not succeeded in banishing the characteristic virile energy with which the face was filled. Nevertheless, it was essentially a cold face, and thus, if in nothing else, a striking contrast to that of the pretty young girl who knelt on the floor, her eyes fixed in breathless excitement on the street beneath.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "If he would only come! Poor fellow! He has been so troubled and unhappy of late—all because of father and the stupid money. It will be splendid to see him—his dear old cheerful self again, won't it?" Frau von Bodenstein nodded, though she did

not speak. "And then," the girl went on, turning suddenly and looking up at her companion, "and then he will understand better—you, I mean. I know, though he never said so, that he thought you cold and hard and unloving. I thought so, too—once. Now this sacrifice has proved how wrong we were." A shadow fell across her gentle face. "You are not angry?" she pleaded, taking the white hand in her own. "Perhaps I ought not to have told you."

Helen von Bodenstein smiled.

"Why should I be angry?" she answered. "It is only natural that you should have thought so of me. Better that than that you should know the truth."

"The truth?" echoed the girl anxiously. The elder woman bent down and kissed the smooth forehead.

"There, you must not worry about an old woman," she said. "Only in your future life, when you see men shrink from their fellow creatures with set lips and frozen eyes, do not always judge them as cold and heartless. Sometimes it is not that. Sometimes it is because they carry within them a mortal wound which needs an iron control to hide from prying eyes. Sometimes, too, their lips are pressed together, because behind them a cry of pain is struggling for utterance. You would have understood me better if you and Kurt had lost each other——" She was interrupted by her companion, who sprang to her feet with an exclamation of excitement.

"He is coming!" she cried. "I heard his spurs.

Listen!" As if to confirm her words a door banged below, and heavy footsteps mounted the stairs. "How tired and sad he seems!" the girl murmured pityingly. The next minute the door opened, and she ran to meet the figure standing on the threshold. What it was, she was never able to explain. Until that instant she had been overflowing with love and joy; but, as she saw him, she stopped suddenly short, frozen by a nameless, inexplicable fear.

"Kurt!" she stammered. "Aren't you glad to see me? I slipped away without anyone knowing on purpose to surprise you! What is the matter?" He came forward, kissed her, and then went to his mother, whose fingers he lifted to his lips.

"Forgive me," he muttered indistinctly. "I did not recognise you—I am wearied to death." As though the words had required his last strength he sank down in the nearest chair, and covered his face with his hands. It had been too dark to read his expression, but his mother had felt the trembling, which seemed to shake him from head to foot. She had felt, also, that his lips had been as cold as ice. She gave a quiet signal, and the girl knelt down, and, forcing his hands gently aside, put a packet into their listless clasp.

"Look, dear!" she whispered. "Then you won't be tired and sad any more." He obeyed her languidly, shifting his position so that a ray of yellow light fell on his bulging pocket-book. He opened it, and one by one the square slips of paper slipped through his nerveless fingers. When he at last

looked up, they saw even through the gloom that every trace of colour had left his face.

"What is it?" He stammered. "I don't understand——"

"It is my wedding gift to you," his mother answered gravely.

"How did you get—this money?"

"Rude boy!" she said, smiling. "That is a secret——"

"Which I shall at once betray!" broke in Hertha von Halbach joyfully. "Think, Kurt! Your dear mother has sold all her precious jewels—all the heirlooms she loved so much in order that we should be able to marry! *Now*, what have you to say?"

Whatever he had to say he did not say it. There was something terrible in his protracted silence, and with a cry of alarm Hertha flung her arms about his neck.

"Kurt!" she pleaded. "You are in trouble—something awful has happened! Tell us!" His lips parted, but he was spared all attempt to answer. Someone tapped at the door, and a servant entered.

"There is a lady downstairs, Gnädige Frau," she said. "She would not give her name, but she said it was of the utmost importance, and she must see you at once." Frau von Bodenstein glanced at the two motionless figures in the shadow.

"I am coming," she said, and without another word followed the servant out of the room. No sooner had the door closed behind her than Hertha caught Kurt's hands in a passionate, terrified clasp.

"Tell me," she whispered. "Oh, my dearest, there must be no secrets between us! My heart aches for you, though I know nothing. Oh, tell me, at least, so that I can help and comfort you!" He bowed his aching head on her shoulder.

"I can't!" he answered brokenly. "I can't! I must bear my punishment alone. You will know soon enough—and then it will be all over. Then you will despise and hate me——"

"Hush!" she broke in. "You know that is not true—that it never could be. I shall always love you—always, always, whatever happens." He drew a little back, as though even in the darkness he was striving to look deep into her eyes.

"Hertha," he said, "promise me, whatever else you may have to believe of me, believe, too, that I am not wholly bad—only a fool who made one false step, and then——" He broke off, and for a long time they sat silently hand in hand, the man staring with heavy, miserable eyes into a future full of certain calamity; the woman, tortured by doubt, seeking in the darkness for some hint of the truth. Presently the door opened, and, looking up, they saw Frau von Bodenstern standing watching them. They could not see her face, but her voice sounded strange, almost unrecognisable.

"Kurt," she said, "take Hertha to her carriage. It has been waiting—it is time!" As though by mutual consent nothing more was said. With a painful effort Hertha rose to her feet and kissed the cold, rigid face.

"Good night," she whispered.

"Good night," came the toneless answer.

Frau von Bodenstein stood where they left her, listening to the footsteps on the stairs. They grew fainter and fainter. As they died into silence she swayed, and, without a sound, sank senseless to the floor.

IV

For a second time Kurt von Bodenstein stood by the general's table and awaited the sentence which was to stamp the whole course of his future life. Truly, it was not the same sentence—it was no longer a question of happiness or sorrow, but of honour and dishonour. And Kurt von Bodenstein felt that honour and he had parted company for ever. Nevertheless, he stood erect, and there was a certain decision in his face which it had hitherto lacked—a strength which had been won after one long night of struggle. He had left youth behind him and become a man. General von Halbach looked up impatiently.

"Well," he said, "did you not get my letter?"

"Yes, Herr General."

"That's well. I do not expect you have finished the copy, but I must have the plans back at once. They have become of the utmost importance, since war with France has cropped up as a possibility——"

"War!" The exclamation broke from Kurt's lips like a groan. General von Halbach glanced at him in cold astonishment.

"Are you surprised that something has taken place without your knowledge, Herr Lieutenant?" he said sarcastically. "Or are you afraid?" The white lips moved, but no sound came from them. "Come—the papers!" The general glanced a second time at the face of the man opposite him, and saw something which shook even his stoic calm. "The papers!" he repeated, and his impatience was already tinged with alarm.

"Herr General, the papers are not in my possession."

"Not in your possession! What do you mean? Are you mad?"

"I repeat they are not in my possession."

"You have lost them?"

"No."

"What then? By heaven——" His ejaculation was never finished. Kurt interrupted him with a gesture in which discipline and respect were forgotten in one despairing resolve.

"I have sold them." There was a long silence. The general's raised fist fell to his side. The eyes into which he stared with all the contempt and loathing he was capable of had never flinched or wavered. They were like those of a dead man.

"Traitor!" He said no more than that, and the silence continued. Someone knocked at the door unheeded. Only when an impatient orderly entered did the general move from his rigid attitude.

"What is it?" he demanded in a voice scarcely under control.

"A visitor to see you, Herr General. Most urgent.

I was to give you this." The man laid a card on the table. The general looked at it and then at the dead, white face opposite. °

"Herr von Bodenstein, you will go into the next room and await my orders," he said. "Orderly, bring the visitor here."

Kurt obeyed. He passed into the adjoining apartment and let the dividing curtains fall behind him with something like a sigh of relief. The ordeal was over, the confession made. All that remained to do was to put to the miserable chapter the "finis" which military and family honour required. He drew his revolver and considered it carefully. There was no trembling about his hand now. He was "facing the thing out" according to his code, and if life and love tempted him in that moment he shut his ears against their tempting. He lifted the weapon to his right temple. A ray of sunshine caught his fancy, and he watched it, feeling it was the last thing he was to see on earth. It was only an instant's hesitation, but in that instant a voice from the adjoining room caught his ears.

"General von Halbach, I have come to you about my son." The revolver sank to his side. Obeying an irresistible impulse he lifted the edge of the curtain and saw that his mother was seated at the table. She was heavily veiled, and yet he recognised her as certainly as he had recognised her voice.

"About your son?" the general repeated slowly. "Do you perhaps know that Lieutenant von Bodenstein is now under arrest?"

"I know," she answered; "or, rather, I guessed. That is why I have come to you. Herr von Halbach, I want you to take these back." As she spoke she drew out a bundle of papers from her bosom and pushed them across the table. "They are still sealed. No harm is done. I want you to forget." He looked from her to the papers, relief and perplexity struggling for the predominance in his cold face.

"These papers—how did you come by them?" he demanded. "They were sold by a traitor——"

"Not by a traitor!" came the answer in a tone of impassioned earnestness, such as Kurt had never heard before. "Rather by a boy much tempted—and by you, General von Halbach! You set him an impossible task, in failing to accomplish which he knew he was losing his whole happiness. You see, I know everything you know, and much more. I know that he gambled for the money—and lost. Last night a woman came to me, the daughter of the man who brought about Kurt's final downfall. I think she pitied Kurt—or loved him. At any rate, she told me everything, and this morning with her help and by means of threats and at the cost of my whole fortune, I won back my son's honour——"

"That is impossible," General von Halbach interrupted.

"Not impossible. There is always mercy——"

"Mercy is a private virtue. In a great organisation it is a fault and a failure."

"Always, Herr von Halbach?" She leant forward, and there was a marked, though trembling, emphasis

on the one word. "*Always?*" He looked at her, his brows knitted as though in painful effort.

"I do not understand you, Gnädige Frau," he said.

"No? Then I will tell you a story which may help you. It is very short. You need not be afraid. May I proceed?"

"By all means."

"Some years ago there was a young officer quartered—shall we say at Darmstadt?—in an—an artillery regiment. He was gay, brilliant, handsome—not weak, but with a vein of headstrong recklessness which in later years was called daring promptitude. He got into bad company. One night, in a fit of mad bravado, he boasted of the superiority of the German guns over those of all other nations, and to prove his assertion betrayed details which he ought never to have betrayed. The next morning he realised his folly, and besought his companions to keep the secret. But it was too late. Though he did not know it, information had already been given to his major——" The general started. "What is the matter, Herr von Halbach?"

"Nothing," he muttered. "Pray continue."

"The major was not a man of honour or fine feeling. He went to the girl who was secretly engaged to the young officer and told her the whole story. Three weeks later the major announced his own engagement to the same girl." General von Halbach threw back his head.

"She was like all women," he said with dogged

scorn. "She deserted the man when he was in trouble."

"No," was the grave answer; "she did not. She sold herself and her life's happiness to save him." There was a moment's silence. Frau von Bodenstein lifted her veil. "General von Halbach, you are my debtor," she said simply. The grey-haired man stumbled to his feet.

"Helen! Heavens, I might have known! Your name, your voice, your son with his mother's face! But I had put you out of my life. I never thought of you or spoke of you—I tried not to. I hated your very name and all women for your sake."

"You are a bad debtor," she said, smiling sadly.

"I did not know what I owed you. How should I? I thought you had deserted me for a richer man. I married afterwards, because my family wished it, and because I was angry and bitter. But"—he passed his shaking hand over his forehead, and one by one the cold, stern features relaxed and softened—"Helen, I have been a hard man since then. I tried to forget. I could not, but in the struggle all that was most human in me froze to stone. Yes, I have been very hard."

"But not now—not any more!" she interposed, pushing the sealed papers once more towards him. "Friedrich, won't you take them back and forget? Won't you give my son the chance to atone as you atoned? Won't you spare him as you were spared?" He looked at her. The tears brimmed up to the sad eyes, welled over, and rolled one by one down the

faded cheeks. "Friedrich!" she pleaded piteously. He leant over the table and took her hands. It was curious to see how the stern lips trembled.

"I am old," he said. "I have suffered, and my best years lie behind me. If I pay my debt with my post it will only be a little thing in comparison to what you have done, and I pay willingly. If I forget, if I give Kurt another chance, if I remove all barriers between him and his happiness, then"—he governed his voice with a strong effort—"shall we be quits, you and I, Helen?" She made no answer. He came over to her side and gently drew her hands from the tear-stained face. "Or do we owe each other all that is left of our lives?" he asked.

Kurt von Bodenstein had long since let the curtain fall. He stood by the window, his young face drawn with pity and endless remorse. Presently a voice he did not recognise called him. He entered, and saw through the blur that swam before his eyes that the general stood by his mother's side and his hand rested in tender protection upon her shoulder.

"Lieutenant von Bodenstein," he said, "you have no doubt heard what has passed. I trust you have learnt your lesson—as—as others have learnt theirs. I trust and believe that you will profit by it. I am retiring from my command. Report yourself, therefore, for further duty to the colonel of your regiment." Then, yielding to a warm impulse, he held out his free hand. "And my daughter will be glad to see you, Kurt," he said.

THE SHIP'S RAT

I

THE neat little *paquebot*, *La Belle France*, had signalled her farewell to Aden, and the passengers loitering on deck cast a last glance at the distant land which they were not to see again for many days, and descended reluctantly to the stuffy region known as the *salle à manger*. *La Belle France* had but small accommodation to offer, and the passengers in question were few and of that mixed quality which, for pecuniary or other reasons, avoid the magnificence and publicity of the usual ocean liners. From the narrow-chested hollow-eyed little doctor who was trying the journey for his health, to the man with the haggard, embittered face who called himself Hume and wore evening dress as out of submission to an unconquerable habit, they were all "stray dogs"—men obviously not Fortune's favourites, and each bearing about him the mark of tragedy or failure—or perhaps worse.

In all, there were ten of them seated at the long table. Two places at the captain's right and left were unoccupied, and instinctively all ten glanced at the vacancies, and from thence to the captain, with the

same unspoken question. The tubby little Frenchman laughed and shrugged his shoulders.

"*Les dames sont toujours en retard,*" he said despairingly. "*Nous attendrons, messieurs.*"

Even as he spoke, the door of the dining saloon swung open, and a gay "*Bon soir, mon capitaine !*" brought him to his feet with a courteous bow.

"We did fear zat ze rough ocean be too much for ze ladies," he said. "We are glad zat our sunshine has rise so glorious as ever !"

She stood still a moment, laughing at him and at them all with a radiancy which seemed to challenge the general gloom ; and, indeed, the faces turned involuntarily to greet her relaxed and lowered their various masks of worry or morose reticence. She was, as the captain had expressed it in high-flown, if not in exact, metaphor, a ray of sunshine which had strayed unexpected into their midst, and they were grateful to her. They were grateful to her because she found it worth while to dress with Parisian elegance for their most un-Parisian meal. They were grateful for her very beauty ; but, above all, for the cheery *bon camaraderie* which she displayed to each. Perhaps they were stricken with the sense of their own unworthiness. They knew that she was Mrs Hadley, a rich young widow, travelling with her trained nurse for the sake of society-worn nerves, and they knew, even if they did not acknowledge it, that they were just "stray dogs" whom Society had either never known at all or else discarded for her own good reasons. In various ways they tried to express their

gratitude. As she approached the table now, there was a general straightening of the shoulders, a noticeable effort to appear gay and unconcerned, which seemed even to transmit itself to Robert Hume. He looked up as he made room for her beside him, and his moody eyes brightened.

"I am glad you have come," he said simply. She sat down, and the soft material of her dress brushed against his hand, the whole atmosphere about him becoming delicately impregnated with some evasive fragrance. He felt himself transported from the shoddy would-be elegance of his surroundings to another unforgettable sphere which he had left behind him.

"Why are you glad?" she said, smiling into his face.

"Need you ask?" he answered. "You are like a piece of dear old England." His looks conveyed more than his words. It said plainly, "You are beautiful; you remind me of all I have ever loved," and something in his thin, hungry face seemed to add, "and lost."

She turned away from his intense gaze—not unkindly, but as though she had understood and feared to show too warm a sympathy.

"Talking of England," the captain put in, "I 'ave a present for you, Monsieur 'Ume. When you were so poorly in Aden I found you this English Journal. I 'eard you say you wished to see one."

He drew a folded *Daily News* from his breast pocket and handed it across. "It is many days old, I fear," he apologised.

Hume almost snatched the paper. He had changed colour, and the slight trembling of his hand betrayed a strange but half-controlled excitement.

"Thank you," he said mechanically.

He was about to place the gift in his own pocket, when his eyes—perhaps by chance, perhaps drawn by some magnetism—met those of his *vis-à-vis*. For the first time, he remembered the presence of Mrs Hadley's nurse. People usually ignored her. There was something in the small pale face and piercing stormy eyes which kept them at a distance, though but for that expression of harassment she would have been almost pretty. Hume hesitated.

"Is there anything particular you want to know, nurse?" he asked.

She nodded, with her eyes on the paper.

"Yes," she said. "Just before we left England a gun-boat was wrecked somewhere off the south coast. I knew no one on board, but the subject interests me. I should be glad to know how it happened—and who were saved."

He looked at her intently for a moment. Then he began to unfold the paper. He did so with deliberation, as though he were taking some malicious pleasure in the performance, and his mouth was twisted in to grim ironical lines.

"You will excuse my satisfying a lady's curiosity at the dinner table, captain?" he said. "Here is a short paragraph."

He then read aloud, with a raised inflection of the voice:

"The work of salvaging the gun-boat A——, which, as will be remembered, was wrecked last week off the south coast, has now begun. Hitherto only two bodies have been recovered. That of the commander of the ill-fated vessel, Lieutenant Andrews, was not among them; but it is believed that it will eventually be found in his berth, where one survivor reports that he was resting at the time of the accident. On the other hand, there are rumours that he was able to escape, and reached the shore safely; but no definite report has been received."

He refolded the paper. "That is all," he concluded.

Captain Anglois stroked his short grey beard thoughtfully.

"I 'ave an English friend who is what you call 'on ze know,'" he said, "and 'e told me zat ze people say ze lieutenant was not quite 'isself—*un peu je ne sais quoi*." He made an expressive gesture with his hands.

"You mean that he was drunk?" Hume said, breaking roughly upon the silence that followed the captain's statement. "There I must venture to contradict, *cher capitaine*. Drunkenness was not Lieutenant Andrews' vice. As his most intimate friend, I know the secret that he kept carefully from the rest of the world, and that secret is the key to the whole matter. A year or two ago he was sent out to the Gold Coast. The climate shattered his health for the time being and left him cursed with insomnia in its most diabolical form. He stood it

during months of torture, and then he took to morphia." He shrugged his shoulders. "If you know anything, you know that morphia is a fiend not lightly shaken off once it has got hold on a man's soul. I believe he did his best—God knows. In the end he might have won. But the catastrophe came too soon, and he and others with him have paid the penalty."

Mrs Hadley pushed back her plate with a gesture of disgust.

"You mean—he was in that state at the time of the accident?"

"That's about it."

"The accident would never have happened if he had been at his post?"

"One can't be sure—no, probably it would never have happened."

He was looking her straight in the face, and as he saw her expression a smile worked at the corners of his mouth. "What is the verdict on such a man?" he asked.

The captain pulled a half-pitying grimace.

"*Pauvre diable—il est mort*," he said expressively.

"And if he were not dead—if he escaped?"

"Then 'e no better than a ship's rat—'e leave the sinking ship and save 'is own life. *C'est un poltron*." Hume looked up.

"You think death the worst punishment?" he said. "To me it seems the easiest. If he had lived there would have been the shame and remorse, the ineffaceable knowledge that his weakness had caused

the destruction of those who had trusted him. One can imagine that death would have been a release to that man—life, Hell.”

His words came rapidly, almost passionately, and with an abrupt change from the cynical coldness with which he had hitherto spoken. Mrs Hadley threw back her head.

“No matter,” she said, “whatever price he paid he was not the less despicable. The man who risks the lives of his comrades for the sake of a wretched vice—ugh! It makes me sick with disgust. I am sorry, Mr Hume, I forgot—he was your friend——”

She looked at him with a shy regret in her eyes. Hume laughed roughly.

“*Was* my friend,” he emphasised. “There isn’t a word you can say which I should not endorse, Mrs Hadley. He was a cur and a coward. As I have said, death saved him from a life’s torture and his family from disgrace. If he had lived—God knows what his punishment would have been.”

“It could not be hard enough,” she said, rising to her feet. “There! take me upstairs, Mr Hume. I feel suffocated in this air.” He gave her his arm and led her up on to the empty deck. From then till the darkness sank upon the quiet ocean he walked backwards and forwards at her side, listening to her gay chatter and watching her still youthful profile with a storm of mingled loneliness and longing drumming at his heart. “I love you, and I want you!” he repeated to himself over and over again until the words maddened him with their

hopeless monotony. As the ten o'clock watch sounded, a woman's frail silhouette rose against the lighted hatchway, and Mrs Hadley stopped and looked up at him with an air of discontent.

"There is my nurse waiting for me," she said. "Isn't it silly that a woman of my age should have a nurse? But the doctor said I must have her, or my silly nerves would go wrong again. He told me I must go with her on a deadly dull journey, when I should be only with people who were either boring or horrid. I don't know what he would say if he knew, for I can't dislike you, and you certainly don't bore me."

He gave her words all the value that could be put into them.

"Thank you," he said gravely. He brought her to the hatchway and watched her till she had climbed down the narrow staircase and disappeared. When he turned he found Nurse Graham at his side. He meant to pass her with a curt "Good night," but again her face and its expression arrested him. Her thin cheeks were bright with angry colour; she held her head high, and there was hot indignation in the eyes that met his in unflinching challenge.

"Why do you look at me like that, nurse?" he asked with an effort at light mockery. "Have I offended you in any way?"

"He was your friend," she retorted passionately, "and you let them say those things of him! Even if they were true you should have spared his memory—you should have stood up for him, not heaped

the disgrace, the shame upon his name. Who are you that you have the right to judge? What do you know of the agonies that man may have suffered when the fiend had once got grip on his soul? What do you know of the awful sleepless nights, of the temptation of relief, of the struggle always harder, always more hopeless? Have you no pity, no mercy?" She stopped breathless, her small white hands clenched, her brows knitted in a storm of painful emotion. "You must think me mad!" she stammered. He shook his head. His own features had softened somewhat, so that his whole face seemed younger, less bitter, more humane.

"I don't think you are mad," he said. "I think perhaps you may be right. Perhaps after all he deserved a little pity. At any rate, you have pitied him. And—he was my friend—I thank you." He held out his hand impulsively, and she took it, and for a moment they stood silent, looking at each other. Then she turned away, but not before he had seen that there were tears glistening in her eyes.

II

Robert Hume found her leaning against the bulwarks, watching the foam break from the vessel's side and drift sternwards, and he stopped to talk with her. He did not usually talk to people, but she looked a forlorn little figure in her simple grey dress, and their conversation of the night before had drawn him to her. Without knowing why, he felt certain that she was labouring under some heavy burden, and

he who had his own burden understood enough to pity. She greeted him with a faint smile of pleasure.

"Mrs Hadley is not ready yet," she said, as though answering an unspoken question. "She will not be long."

"Mrs Hadley is very delicate?" he suggested, taking his place at her side. A faint scornful line crept round her mouth.

"She is run down, that is all," she said. "There is nothing serious the matter with her. If there were I should not be here." He saw her expression and heard the contemptuous inflection of her voice, but he knew by instinct that neither were directed against Mrs Hadley.

"You do not undertake serious cases?" he asked.

"No," she answered shortly. "Not now." Her tone was final, but curiosity urged him further.

"Might I ask why not?" She hesitated, and then to his surprise she laughed, though with a certain roughness which devoided the sound of all mirth.

"There is a slight analogy in our circumstances," she said. "I too had a friend, a woman whom I trusted absolutely, in whom I believed above everything in the world. She was a nurse like myself, and all the most dangerous cases were given into her hands—because she was so trustworthy. One night a patient died—it was a little child—died because my friend had slept when she should have watched. That broke my nerve. You see, I suffered with her the remorse, the self-reproach——" She stopped, frowning, as though at some painful recollection.

"That is why you understood so well last night?" he suggested gently.

"Yes—perhaps." There was a long silence between them, and then he began to talk of other things—impersonal things—not of Mrs Hadley. And this was strange, because at first he had been impelled by an almost morbid desire to talk of the woman who, in the short time they had been together, had spun an unbreakable web about his heavy and unwilling heart. Now he was able, even eager, to turn the conversation elsewhere, so that indirectly he could fathom farther into the depths of this strange, close-lipped little woman. He wanted to know more about her, and he talked on, unconscious that the time was passing, until suddenly Mrs Hadley stood before them in all the glory of soft muslins and rich laces. She was looking unusually lovely, unusually fresh and youthful, and his heart bounded with the old painful happiness as her hand rested in his.

"I have come as a messenger," she said gaily. "I met the doctor on the steps, and he asked me to tell you and nurse that he wanted to speak to you both in the captain's cabin."

She laughed and shook her finger.

"I believe there is a plot on foot to get up some frivolity to amuse me," she declared. "The doctor has always been threatening something of the sort, and you can tell him from me that it is very wrong of him. He knows I am only here in order to be bored back to health."

"At any rate, we must obey the summons," Hume

said reluctantly. "Come, nurse!" They descended the hatchway together. At the bottom Nurse Graham stopped suddenly.

"Do you ever have presentiments?" she asked.

"Sometimes. Why?"

"Because I have one now. I feel as though something had happened, or was going to happen." He made no answer. They had reached the door of the captain's cabin. He tapped sharply, but though a muffled voice answered them he did not move. For an instant both hesitated as though restrained by the same indefinable foreboding. Then with an impatient jerk of the shoulders Hume turned the handle and entered. The captain was seated at the table, his face buried in his arms. He did not move or speak, and they glanced from his bowed figure to the doctor who stood at the far end of the cabin. The little man's face was whiter than they had ever before seen it—whiter, and if possible more anxious. He motioned them to shut the door.

"I have sent for you because you are the two in whom I have the most confidence," he said. "And I have something of the utmost gravity to communicate. The plague has broken out on board this ship. Captain Anglois and the second mate, Monsieur Chénard, are its first victims." The announcement burst upon them like a clap of thunder. For a moment no one spoke. They avoided each other's eyes, and the silence grew oppressive with dread and fear of what was to come. Hume took a step forward.

His first thought had been for Mrs Hadley, beautiful, delicately nurtured Mrs Hadley.

"Are you sure?" he said. The doctor approached the prostrate man, and with deft fingers turned back his coat sleeve.

"You, nurse, may perhaps be able to recognise the signs," he said. They saw the livid red spots, and when the unfortunate captain lifted his face the one hope left them died to ashes.

"*Moi, je suis perdu,*" he said in a rough, dry voice they hardly recognised. "*Je le sais, et cela m'est égal—je n'ai pas peur, moi.* No, no, I 'ave no fear, not for me, but for my ship, *ma Belle France!* Who will bring her to port when I and Chénard are gone? She has no one else. *Les autres sont des sots.* They will run her on to ze rocks, and she is all I 'ave, all I leave my wife, my child——" He burst into a storm of terrible half-delirious sobs, and the three looked at each other in blank despair. *La Belle France* was badly manned with officers. If indeed the worst should happen, and they should be left pilotless—what then? It was the question they asked each other in one wordless glance. It rose for the moment darker, more threatening even than the phantom Death which stood amidst them in the narrow cabin.

"And if I promised you that your ship should reach Melbourne safely, would you be less afraid?" They looked at Hume in dull wonderment. His face had changed. Energy and resolve had transfigured him. Captain Anglois reeled to his feet.

"*Mon Dieu!*" he gasped. "Who can help, who can save us?"

"I can," came the quiet answer. "I am a sailor, and I know these seas well. I will bring *La Belle France* safe to port, God helping me!" He swung round. "And you, doctor, you will do your share. You will fight this death—you and——" He hesitated. Nurse Graham stood at the doctor's side.

"This is my chance," she said. No one noticed her words then, though afterwards Hume remembered them. For the second time he held out his hand to her.

"You are a brave woman," he said. "I knew you would help us. Above all things, Mrs Hadley must not be told. If she knew that the plague was on board——" He stopped, interrupted by a muffled scream close at hand, the soft thud of a falling body. In one bound he had reached the door, and wrenched it open. A piteous bundle of muslins lay huddled together in the narrow passage. He saw no more than the lovely ashy face. With a savage jerk he flung aside the captain, who had stumbled blindly forward, and bending down gathered Mrs Hadley in his arms.

"Keep back!" he shouted. "Keep back! Don't come near her!" Her eyes opened, and she clung to him like a frightened child.

"I heard!" she whispered. "I thought it was some joke, and I listened. Oh, God, save me, save me!"

"I will save you!" he answered, and he bore her thence as though the hands of the hideous death behind them had already clutched her.

III

Robert Hume stood at the helm of *La Belle France* and guided her course through the churning waters. The bitter east wind drew no colour to his cheeks, and his eyes, fixed on the bank of clouds towards which they were driving, were dark with weariness and physical pain. Once he glanced at the woman cowering in the rough shelter which he had built at his side. She was wrapped in furs, but her face was pinched with cold, and she met his gaze with a look of mingled fear and hope.

"You think I am safe?" she repeated for the hundredth time. "You don't think it can reach me here? I am feeling so well and strong. It begins with fever, doesn't it? And I have no fever. If you could only feel my hands——" She laughed shakily, and drew her furs closer about her. A gust of wind broke against the tarpaulins which protected her, and the laugh wavered and became a half-hysterical sob of terror. "Oh, how the wind frightens me!" she moaned. "You don't think it will get worse? Why doesn't the captain come, or the second mate, or whatever he is called? You said they were better." He made no answer. He could not tell the truth. He could not tell her that twenty-four hours before Captain Anglois' body had been consigned to the water, nor that below deck Death was striding from victim to victim with cruel, rapacious swiftness. He could not tell her, because he loved her too much; though unknown to him his love was mingled with that pity which is near contempt.

"Do not be afraid," he said between his teeth. "You know I would give my life to keep you from all harm. Even now——"

"Even now——?" she repeated, questioninglly.

"Even now I am here for your sake," he said.

She clasped her hands with a pretty movement of gratitude.

"I know. And you make me feel so safe. I have such confidence in you."

"You do not know me," he said roughly.

"I do know you. I know that you are good and strong and brave——"

"Don't!" He lifted his hand as though to ward off some blow. "You make me realise——" He stopped again.

"What do I make you realise?"

There was an almost caressing note in the low voice.

"What might have been—what I have lost."

He kept his eyes fixed sternly ahead over the lonely waste of water. His whole strength seemed concentrated on some hard, inward struggle so that he could not face her, and when suddenly her hand rested on his he started as though he had been touched with fire.

"Look!" she said. "What is that—there—straight ahead?"

He followed the indication of her eager finger. He felt her tremble, and as his eyes scanned the stormy horizon her excitement kindled a sombre glow in his own hard, set face.

"It is a ship," he said. "A tramp of some sort, bearing straight down our course, too. We should be within hailing distance in an hour." He spoke half to himself, and he still did not look at her. Her hand tightened on his.

"If we were only safe on board!" she whispered. "If we could only escape from this poisonous prison—you and I——"

She left the thought unfinished. A violent gust from the coming storm drove the spray into their faces, and when they had brushed away the blinding water they saw that they were no longer alone. Nurse Graham stood on the bridge. Her hair was wind-tossed over the pale face, which seemed to have grown smaller and thinner. But the eyes were brilliant with a new life.

"I have come with a message from the doctor," she said abruptly. "Monsieur Chénard is dead. His last words were that the command should pass into your hands. There is no one else."

She ignored his gesture of appeal. "Mrs Hadley, it is better that you should know the truth," she said.

The woman at Hume's side shivered, and drew back as though from contamination.

"What is—the truth?" she stammered.

"Shall I tell her—Mr Hume?"

For an instant he made no answer. His eyes were fixed upon the horizon, and a hard, reckless line carved itself about his mouth.

"Tell her!" he said.

Nurse Graham stepped farther on to the bridge.

"Five of the passengers are stricken," she said. "Two are 'suspect,' the others are helping the doctor like heroes. Of the crew only ten are safe cases, and they are lying huddled in their berths. They have refused to go back to the engines. They say a hurricane is getting up, and that the rats are leaving the ship. They believe that we are doomed."

Mrs Hadley uttered a piercing cry.

"Doomed! Mr Hume—is that true? Is there no hope?"

"I can hold out very little."

"My God! You say that so quietly! Can't you do something?" His numbed hands still grasped the helm of the drifting vessel. He looked down into the lovely upturned face, and his own lit up with a sudden flash of understanding.

"Signal!" she whispered. "Signal! Offer them any price they like. Surely for money they will take the risk. If you love me, save me—save us both!"

"If I love you!" he repeated.

"As I love you!" she broke in recklessly. "Oh, save us! What can you do here? The ship is not yours. You are not the captain. You can do nothing. For our love's sake——" She was smiling up at him with a strange coquetry behind which terror lurked in all its grim force. But he saw only her beauty, the dazzling brilliancy of her pleading eyes. He held her fast by both arms.

"Mrs Hadley—you don't know who I am," he stammered. "If you knew you would shrink from me."

"Never!"

"Not if I were a man haunted by some contemptible vice, an outcast, bearing a false name, flying from a deserved punishment——"

"You are the man I love!" she answered.

"Swear it—whatever I am, whatever I have done!"

"I swear it—only save me! My life belongs to you!"

With an oath Hume seized a rope and lashed the helm firm. There was an expression on his flushed, dogged face that matched the oath in its reckless violence. He grasped the woman who still clung to him, and half carried her towards the steps.

"Come, then!" he cried; and then turning, he repeated, "Come!"

Nurse Graham stood motionless, looking at him. Her hand rested on the helm. Her head was thrown back. There was pride and a breathing, passionate resolution in her attitude.

"No, Lieutenant Andrews," she said; "I at least cannot desert the ship twice."

He stopped. Almost mechanically he let his trembling burden slip to the ground. The hot colour died out of his cheeks, leaving him suddenly pale and quiet.

"You know?" he said.

She nodded.

"Yes, I know. At first it was no more than a guess. Something you said made me think. Afterwards, when you took over the command I was certain. I don't know how you escaped death or

detection—I do not care to know—but I pitied you with my whole heart, because I knew what you had suffered and would suffer. You see, I too have human life upon my conscience. It was I who let the child die. It was I who failed to fulfil my duty through a moment's weakness—the one slip—as yours, perhaps, was the last of many. God forgive us both!”

“God forgive us both!” he repeated in hoarse despair. Both had forgotten Mrs Hadley. She turned to them with an angry stamp of impatience.

“What does it matter what you are or what you have done?” she cried. “Save me!”

He looked at her. Perhaps in that moment he remembered her proud, scornful words which nights before had burnt into his guilt-laden soul. Perhaps in that moment he caught a glimpse of the real woman beneath the gaudy seeming. He turned again. Margaret Graham held out her hands as though to draw him back.

“It does matter what you are!” she said. “It matters whether you are a brave man striving to wipe out a past weakness, or whether you are no better than the rats that desert the sinking ship. Don't you see”—a flame of energy and hope illuminated her pale, earnest face—“don't you see it is the chance that has been given us—the chance to atone!”

He put his hand to his head like a man waking from some black stupor.

“Atone!” he repeated.

“Yes, yes!” she cried. “The chance to throw off our burden and begin again. Down below there are

lives for whom we—you and I—are the last, the only hope. Will you desert them too?"

Her hand was still outstretched. He caught it and held it in a strong, firm grasp. The flame of her enthusiasm had touched him. It shone out of his eyes; it burnt brightly through the dark shadow of bitterness and self-contempt.

"Not this time!" he said. "Not this time!" In that moment of resurrection from the past he forgot the beautiful face turned seawards in straining anxiety. He saw only the woman whose hand had drawn him back from a second and deeper Hell.

"See!" Mrs Hadley cried. "It is getting closer and closer. Signal, or it will be too late!" He remembered then with a painful start.

"I cannot leave the ship," he said. "And you——"

"Signal!" she repeated furiously. He understood her then. He understood the love for which he had been ready to barter his soul. Quietly he unlashed the helm.

"I will signal," he said. "If money can save you, you will be saved."

And money saved her. An hour later a great ugly merchantman, homeward bound, hove to within hailing distance of *La Belle France*, and after many delays a boat was sent over the uneasy water and bore Mrs Hadley out of reach of danger. Hume bade her "God speed" from the gangway, and if he watched her disappear with the pain of bitter disillusion, he knew at least that she felt nothing but relief. She was safe—that was all she had asked of him—and he

went back to his post and cast no backward glance at the vessel steaming into the stormy darkness. His eyes were fixed ahead with the stern resolution of a man who sees death sweeping down upon him and knows that he stands alone to meet the onslaught. The wind had risen to a gale, and, like some unseen phantom, shrieked round his ears and lashed the waves to threatening, moving walls of water. *La Belle France* rode bravely, and something in Hume thrilled as she rose triumphant from the deluge that broke against her sides. The old gnawing temptation that had been his ruin in the past was forgotten in the joy of battle. He thought of the lives for which he was fighting and of the woman who had bade him fight. And even as he thought of her he heard her voice calling him through the gathering gloom.

"I have told them what you have done!" she cried. "The men know that you have stuck to the ship in spite of everything, and it has put new life into them. They are going back to their work at the engines, and, better than all, the doctor believes that that we are fighting a winning battle and that the worst is over. God grant that many of us may yet see Melbourne!"

"God grant it!" he said. "And God bless you!" She had climbed to his side on the dripping, wind-swept bridge; and by the light of the lantern that burnt beside the compass, he saw her face, and its look filled him with a strange peace.

"You have saved me," he said. "You have saved the best in me. An hour ago I was a mad coward,

ready to throw away my last chance of salvation for a lovely face. But now I am sane. Can you trust me?"

"I do trust you," she said. "Otherwise I should not care."

A new hope burnt up suddenly in the outcast's heart. He no longer saw the black clouds rolling up against them from the stormy horizon. He saw the vista of a new life bravely lived, the vision of a comradeship sealed in trial and temptation.

"You have stood by me in my worst hour," he said. "Will you stand by me to the end?"

"To the end!" she answered.

"That may be soon—or it may be many years."

"Time can make no difference."

He took a tiny glass phial from his pocket and held it to her.

"This is my first gift of gratitude," he said. She took it, and when she had glanced at it she lifted her arm and flung the poison from her. A gust of the rising wind seemed to seize it and bear it with a shriek of triumph into the gathering night.

"There goes the past!" she cried joyously. "The future is ours—yours and mine—to make of it what we will."

"An atonement!" he said.

They exchanged a handclasp, and when she had gone he faced the storm alone with the strong, composed face of a conqueror.

THE COMET'S TAIL

I

THE quarrel had been brewing for a long time. Hitherto it had only manifested its coming by splutters of irritability; it came now with a roar and a rattle like a veritable thunderstorm. After all, it was a very natural sort of quarrel. Given two people both in the prime of life, both gay, both spoilt, both fond of the good things, and blessed with an incurable habit of living at just double the rate of their income, and, however fond they are of each other, friction is sure to arise.

In this particular case the immediate cause of the final explosion was a quite unimportant bill for Mrs Godfrey's gloves. As you may imagine, Mr Paul Godfrey had had to confront worse items, but it happened to come together with his own racing account, and what with one thing and another it proved a last straw.

"My dear Jean," he said with that apparent calm which is the most dangerous symptom in a discussion, "your bills are getting really preposterous. One would think from this last item of yours that we were rolling millionaires."

"You must be mixing it up with your stable

account," said Mrs Godfrey with that sweetness which also bodes no good for peace.

Little Dorothea, who sat at her mother's right hand at the tea-table, was not deceived. At the great age of eight one is not easily deceived as to the domestic thermometer, and on this occasion she sniffed a storm. She looked across at Paul junior just to see how he was taking it. Paul junior—it must be admitted—was a very silly little boy. Perhaps on account of inferior years, or of the wobbly constitution which the slightest imaginable excess in buns threw out of gear, he had a notorious habit of breaking into tears every time a gust of irritability blew over the dining-room table—a fairly frequent event, as I have already hinted. This time, however, he was deceived by his mother's sweetness. He beamed at her over his half-devoured piece of bread and jam, and was sad because she ignored him.

"One thing is quite clear," his father said, still calm, "our expenses must be reduced. I suppose you do not want us to end up in the bankruptcy court?"

"I should dislike it above all things," Mrs Godfrey retorted, still sweet. "In your place I should reduce my stable at once."

"Your dressmaker's bill would be much more to the point."

"Why?"

"Because it is absurd—ridiculous—a wicked extravagance."

"Horses and clubs are not exactly necessary to a holy existence."

"Jean, I forbid that tone before the children!"

"Paul, I refuse to be ordered about!"

And there you have the quarrel in full swing! It would be quite a waste of time to chronicle the brilliant, bitter, highly illogical repartee which followed. In the first place, we all know the course of such domestic discussions; and, in the second, our story concerns Paul's great experience, which is only indirectly connected with the unhappy affairs of his parents. Truth to tell, he did not understand the repartee. He was such a silly little boy that he detected nothing particularly threatening in the low, level voices. Usually when there was trouble, his mother burst out crying, whereupon his father melted, and the general floods—to which Paul himself generously contributed—were appeased. But to-day mother was very quiet, and she did not look in the least like crying.

"I shall not reduce my expenses until you reduce yours," was her ultimatum. "Because you are a mass of selfishness is no reason why I should sacrifice myself to you."

"Very well. But I warn you that I shall not hold myself responsible for your extravagance."

"Thank you! That means a notice in the papers, I suppose. I prefer to go home!"

"Go!" said her husband between his teeth.

Mrs Godfrey rose to her feet. She was young and very spoilt, and self-control was not one of her many virtues.

"You are detestable!" she said, as she swept out of the room. "And I hate you!"

For the first time Paul junior realised that the matter was serious—unusually serious. He had just taken a mouthful of bread and jam, which made sobs a physical impossibility, but the bitter tears rolled down his cheeks. His father scowled at him. He felt exasperated—perhaps a little ashamed—but life had never taught him to keep his temper within bounds.

"You are a perfect little water-works!" he said roughly. "What is the matter with you now, pray?"

His son made no answer, partly because at the age of seven one's vocabulary does not admit of graphic descriptions of interior convulsions, partly because a sob and a lump of bread and jam were locked in a death struggle about half-way down his throat.

His father rose impatiently.

"For pity's sake stop, at any rate!" he said, and went out in his turn, slamming the door after him.

"I'm glad *I'm* not a water-works!" said Dorothea with pious gratitude, as she took the opportunity to help herself to some more jam. This taunt won the day for the sob, which burst past its obstructor with heart-rending violence.

"Father told you you weren't to!" Dorothea continued, still brightly self-righteous. "You're just like mother. You always do what you're told not, and you have no——" She hesitated, and then concluded with great solemnity—"no self-control."

This was the expression her parents were most fond of, and without understanding its exact meaning she had a vague idea that it was connected with "water-works," and therefore perfectly applicable to

the present situation. Paul knew still less, but he felt sure that the expression was derogatory.

"You aren't to say things about my mother!" he said fiercely. "She is the bestest, beautifullest woman in the world!"

"Father says she is extravagant and careless," retorted his sister, who, besides a tendency to side with her father, had an excellent memory for his pet phrases. "He is very angry with her, and she is going away." She nodded at the still weeping Paul with a malicious sweetness which in another feminine member of the family drove Mr Paul Godfrey, senior, to distraction. Paul junior checked a sob.

"It isn't true!" he said.

"It is!"

"It isn't! She couldn't leave me!"

"She could. Father says she doesn't care for anything 'cept her clothes!" And Dorothea, having finished the jam, scrambled down from her chair, arranged her nicely starched frock, and marched with dignity to the door. On the way the temptation to pull Paul's fair hair proved irresistible.

"You silly little boy!" she gibed. "You're making your milk all watery!"

The statement was not without truth; but somehow, like the glove bill, it proved the last straw, and it is the present chronicler's unpleasant duty to record that the usually soft-hearted and tender Paul flew at his sister. The scene that followed was interrupted by the entrance of cook, who parted the heated combatants with a hand that was firm, but not gentle.

"Drat them children!" she exclaimed indignantly. "If they aren't a-quarrelling again! Miss Dorothea, just look at your nice clean frock!"

"It's him!" retorted Dorothea fiercely and ungrammatically. "It's him!"

"Then he's very naughty!" and cook shook Paul for a change. "Aren't you ashamed to hit your sister, you little ruffian?"

"I'm not 'shamed!" Paul retorted, intoxicated by the joy of battle. "I'm not! She said my mother didn't care for me, and it isn't true!"

A rather acid smile relaxed cook's flushed and angry face.

"No blame to her if she don't!" she said. "Such a nasty, mean-spirited little boy! You'll stay in here all by yourself till you've got over your wicked tantrums. Come along, Miss Dorothea!" And she carried off her wailing charge, leaving Paul alone on the field of victory. It must be confessed that for the moment he was not particularly impressed by the punishment thus inflicted on him. As a rule—perhaps on account of the afore-mentioned wobbly constitution—he screamed when left alone in the twilight, but his own conduct had lifted him out of himself. For the first time in his life he had grasped the initiative, he had attacked, he had retorted, he had not wept, he had proved that he was not a water-works, but a MAN! And, above all things, he had defied cook! Even mother did not dare to do that—it was almost as though he had defied Heaven! Somehow, though, the thought of his mother marked

the turning-point in his courage. Of course, it was not true that she did not love him—that she was going away. Yet why had she not smiled at him over the table? Was it possible that he was such a naughty boy that she *couldn't* love him? The thought was appalling in its newness.

In desperate haste he tried to review the villainies of the last week—further back than that he could not remember. Dorothea had quarrelled with him at least seven times, but then that was not his fault; he had wept five times, but then that was a low average; to-day he had hit Dorothea and defied cook! Certainly the last two items were very black. Had mother foreseen the evil that her face had been so dark and stormy at tea-time, and if so, why had she not warned him? Why had she not said, "Paul, dear, beware of Tantrums!" Then he would have been on the look-out. It was all too mysterious. A weary sigh that was not unlike a sob lifted the small chest beneath the pinafore. He crawled up into the big arm-chair and composed himself. Tantrums, he understood from cook's description, was a sort of illness with which little boys were periodically afflicted, and the only way to get rid of them was to sit very still and wait till they went away. So Paul sat and waited. The Tantrums went, leaving him very cold and miserable. The twilight deepened. Quite suddenly he realised that the dining-room was very dark indeed.

Now darkness is for most people a perfectly natural sort of phenomenon, but for Paul it was a Live Thing. Not only was it alive itself, but it brought everything

else to life. At night, for instance, when he woke up, the brass balls at the end of his bed winked at him, the clock on the mantelpiece conversed loudly and distinctly with the mice, the window-curtains waved their arms till he put his head under the bed-clothes in a cold perspiration of terror. But now there were no bed-clothes. He had to sit still and watch the shadows take human form, and the furniture become threatening, solemn figures which loomed out of the darkness. In desperation he tried shutting his eyes. Then he heard weird sounds as though Something were creeping closer and closer and closer until—Paul scrambled down from the chair and rushed head-long out into the passage.

This time it was not Tantrums, but Terror which had hold of his small soul. In a veritable panic his small legs bore him from room to room. Everywhere the same silence, and everywhere the Awful Something followed him, grasping at his flying pinafore, and always just missing it by a hair's breadth. In every corner Something lurked waiting to spring out on him; all around he heard soft sounds of the unseen enemy. He did not cry out—he could not. His legs shook under him, his breath came in little dry gasps. In a kind of fever he reached the top of the kitchen stairs, and sank down in a little heap of helpless misery, with his face buried in his arms, and waited for the Something to spring on him and devour him. The sounds drew nearer—Paul nearly suffocated in his agony—the next minute Susan, his mother's maid, pattered past, nearly treading on him in the darkness.

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Paul could scarcely believe that he was alive. Slowly and cautiously he crept after Susan down the narrow stairs. The kitchen door was open, and he could see James, the butler, reading his evening paper. The sight of the portly figure brought Paul to his senses. He realised with a gasp that the Tantrums must still be lurking somewhere in his small person, because he was doing something which he shouldn't. The kitchen was forbidden ground, and — thanks to the evil influence of the Tantrums — there he was! Paul crouched on the last step but three. He was lost anyhow, and he couldn't—he simply couldn't go back to where the Awful Something was waiting to devour him. So he sat there and defied the world, and took comfort in the sound of human voices.

"Just think of that, now!" James was saying in fat wonder. "There's that 'Alley's Comet due to-morrow. Them horstrolegers seem in a 'igh way about it."

"Wot's 'Alley's Comet?" demanded the scullery-maid, who was an ignorant person. "Is it one of them race 'osses you're always a-talkin' about, Mr Blake?"

Mr James Blake waved his hand scornfully.

"One sees where you was abrought up, my dear Jane," he said. "'Alley's Comet is a—a comet."

"Wot's a comet?"

"A comet?" James coughed and cleared his throat. "A comet is a bright 'eavenly body wot is always on the move, so to speak, and 'as a tail."

"Lawks!" said the scullery-maid.

"This paper says as 'ow it ain't unlikely that if we get mixed up in the tail we shall all be blown up,"

James went on with the assurance of success. "That's a nice look-out, ain't it, cook?"

Cook jumped nervously.

"Blown up!" she echoed.

"Get along with you, Mr Blake!" said Susan with a pertness which showed that the prospect of being "blown up" presented nothing new to her. "You've been listening to master and missis. Explosions have got on your brain."

"'Ave they been at it again?" queried the autocrat of the kitchen condescendingly.

"Have they, indeed! Cat and dog wasn't in it. Missis has got a temper enough to make the fur fly."

"As a gentleman I must protect the lady," said James with a courtly inclination of the head. "And for that matter, master's temper ain't nothing to boast about."

The scullery-maid, who was inclined to be sentimental, shook her head sadly.

"It's a real pity," she said. "Such a nice-lookin' couple, too. I was quite proud of them—I was, really. Won't nothing ever bring them together again?"

"Nothing," said cook mournfully. "When debts comes in at the window love flies out of the door. That's a proverb, and it's a very good one."

"If wot Mr Saunders of the livery stables says is true, we shall have to fly too," James declared. "They're up to their necks in debt all round. We can be thankful if we gets our wages—mark my words!"

There was a general exclamation. Susan nodded mysteriously.

"I've a notion my job's off already," she said. "Missis went out this afternoon in a high flutter. I believe she has gone to her mother's, and won't come back. She's that headstrong!"

"Wot about the children?" someone asked. Susan laughed.

"She don't care for them more than I care for the comet!" she said, and snapped her fingers.

Cook dropped a plate, Susan screamed, James jumped out of his chair, and the scullery-maid and Susan clung to each other in terror. They had heard a piteous smothered cry, and the sound of something bumping slowly down the stairs.

"The comet!" stuttered the scullery-maid.

"A—a ghost!" gasped cook.

Susan was the first to recover herself. When the cry was repeated she rushed out and found a small figure huddled at the bottom of the stairs weeping bitterly.

"Well, if it ain't that naughty little boy in another tantrum, and doing what he shouldn't!" she exclaimed. "You come along to bed, Master Paul. You ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I want my mother!" Paul wailed, trying to wrench himself free.

"Well, you can't have her. She don't want none of you. You come along to bed!"

"I want my mother!" Paul repeated, frantic with despair.

But Susan carried him off in triumph,

II

Paul sat up in bed.

Whether it was that the cold kitchen stairs had been too much for his unsteady constitution, or whether it was a remnant of his struggle with Susan, is not certain, but certain it is that he was trembling from head to foot—and not with fear. This latter point is all the more remarkable because the little bedroom was in almost complete darkness, the bedstead knobs were winking their hardest, the curtains were waving in the night air in a way which might have shattered the strongest nerves. But Paul was not afraid. His head ached, his heart ached, he ached everywhere, and was hot and cold by turns—but not with fear. Something had come into his life which drove fear out. Just at that moment he would not have minded if the Awful Something had sprung upon him and devoured him. He felt so miserable that such a calamity would have been rather a relief than otherwise. No one had tucked him in, no one had heard him say his prayers. His parents did not love each other any more, they would never love each other again, they did not love him—as Susan had said, they did not care any more for him than she cared for the comet. Paul closed his eyes. His thoughts seemed not quite under his control, for they wandered off to the comet and twisted and turned in the effort to picture the 'eavenly body which was going to blow them all up within the next twenty-four hours—and had a tail.

The tail fascinated Paul's imagination. Like his

thoughts it seemed to wriggle about in frantic contortions. It took to making such bewildering twists before his imagination that to get rid of it he opened his eyes again. For a minute he simply stared. Then he rubbed his eyes carefully with his knuckles and looked again. What *had* happened? The room was still in darkness, but in front of him, just where the brass knobs were wont to wink, there was an extraordinary Something.

Paul's description afterwards was somewhat confused, but the chronicler gathers that the Something was about twice the size of an ordinary hoop, very bright and luminous, possessing neither legs nor body, so far as one could see, but with eyes and a nose and a mouth, a bald head like an old gentleman—and a Tail! Paul noticed the Tail at once. It was yards and yards long—how long is uncertain, as it was curled round, and besides, was so restless that it was impossible to form an accurate estimation—but, like the face, it was very bright and shining. Will you believe it when I say that Paul was really not half so frightened as one might have expected? Somehow, although the Something looked very cross indeed, Paul felt that it was really at bottom quite a good-natured Something—possibly put out of sorts by an over-indulgence in buns.

"Good evening!" said Paul, politely. "How do you do?"

"Don't be impertinent!" the Something retorted with a grimace. "Don't you know that it is very rude for little boys to address their superiors without giving a name?"

"But I don't know your name!" Paul protested. "Besides, it's very rude to come into a person's bedroom without knocking."

The Something opened its eyes so wide with indignation that Paul realised at once that he had betrayed unmistakable signs of Tantrums.

"Perhaps if you would be so kind as to mention your name——" he suggested apologetically.

"My name," said the Something, with offended dignity, "is Airiosparklorum—at least, that's as near as one can get to it in your silly language."

"Thank you," said Paul. "It sounds very pretty. I suppose you haven't got anything shorter, have you?"

The Something waved its tail contemptuously.

"It's quite the shortest we have in our language," he said. "*You* call me Halley's Comet—why I don't know. I existed generations before *that* person, and it was an impertinence to call me after him—just as though I were a new-born starlet. You humans have an opinion of yourselves which quite takes away my sparkle."

"I am very sorry," said Paul, rather alarmed by the tail, which was threatening to sweep the washhand-stand out of the window, "and I am very glad to meet you. I heard James talking about you this evening. You are a heavenly body, aren't you?"

"Eh?" said the Comet.

"A heavenly body," Paul repeated, afraid that he had somehow hurt his visitor's feelings.

The Comet cast down its eyes and considered itself with some satisfaction.

"Perhaps I am," it said in a mollified tone. "At any rate, I have always given great satisfaction to my employers."

"I beg your pardon?" said Paul. "Your what——?"

"My employers," the Comet repeated testily. "I am Messenger-in-Ordinary to the Moon, and General Agent to the Hemisphere. It's a very good position."

"I should think so!" Paul agreed. "I should love to know the Moon."

"Oh, I don't think much of her myself," the Comet returned, with an airy wave of the tail. "She has gone off colour a good deal lately. That comes of borrowing so much from the Sun. Personally, I disapprove of getting into debt."

Paul nodded, and remembered his parents, who were "up to their neck in it."

"It must be very uncomfortable," he said sadly.

"Besides—it's a very bad example for the Starlets," the Comet continued. "For my part, I always take care that I have enough light of my own, and I think the Moon is a disgrace. I should certainly blow her up if it wasn't for her position."

"Of course, I forgot. You *do* blow up people, don't you?" Paul said.

"Certainly; it's part of my business. I have blown up hundreds of worlds in my time. A twist of the tail, and there you are!"

"Oh, dear, there goes the washhand-stand!" Paul cried. "Susan will be so cross!"

The Comet drew in its tail. There was a look of smug satisfaction on its round face.

"That's nothing to what I can do," it said. "You should have seen me blow up the last world. It was the neatest thing imaginable."

"Why do you blow up worlds?" Paul asked, still very worried about the washhand-stand. "Isn't it rather unkind?"

"Not at all. They deserved it."

"Why?"

"Because they quarrelled and were so disagreeable to each other."

Paul sighed.

"I suppose they didn't love each other any more," he said.

"Nonsense!" the Comet retorted. "That's no reason. People quarrel because they are idiots. They think they want things which don't really matter in the least, and lose their tempers if they can't have them. When trouble comes they come to their senses. That's what trouble is for, you know. That's what I'm for. I frighten people, and then they forget to be idiots and stop quarrelling. If they don't stop I blow them up. And it's my full intention to blow *you* up." The Comet glared menacingly. "You are the worst world of the lot."

But Paul only sighed.

"I don't care," he said.

"You don't care!"

"Not a bit."

The Comet threw up its tail with an exclamation of disgust.

"If that isn't past all bearing!" it cried. "When

I appeared in 1066 everybody was frightened out of their wits. The worst enemies were ready to make friends so long as I would keep out of the way. And I did—though they had been quarrelling disgracefully. And what's my reward? Why, now when I come, they say 'Bosh! Get along with you!' or 'I don't care!' and go on fighting as though I didn't exist. And pray, why don't *you* care, you silly little boy?"

A tear trickled down Paul's cheek. It was positively the first he had shed during the whole interview.

"Father and mother don't love each other any more—and they don't love me," he explained, struggling with a sob.

"Of course!" said the Comet. "I know all about that. They have been disturbing the hemisphere for weeks past."

Paul was so surprised that he stopped crying.

"I don't understand," he said.

"Of course you don't," his visitor retorted. "You humans never understand the simplest things. I wager you have never even heard of the Music of the Spheres?"

"Never!" said Paul, more and more bewildered.

"Well, whether you know it or not, the Spheres *are* musical, and whenever you humans quarrel it creates a frightful disturbance in the Grand Orchestra Concerts which they hold every evening. They have a very fine ear, and when there is a quarrel down in the world it is just as though some one were banging on a wrong note. All the little stars go out of tune, the elder ones lose their places, and the Clerk of

the Weather—who is an important member of the audience—loses his temper. That's why you have been having such bad weather lately. And this evening things went from bad to worse. Your parents had been disagreeing for the second time in two days, and it so annoyed Jupiter that he came in three bars too soon and upset the whole concert. After that I was told to come and blow you up. However, I am really so out of breath with hurrying that I had to take a rest here first."

"You won't really blow father and mother up?" Paul said. He was quite frightened now. He did not mind much about himself, but it was awful to think of his dearests being blown sky-high.

"Certainly, your father and mother especially. They are the worst of the lot. And they have nothing whatever to quarrel about. There is no excuse for them."

The Comet curled its tail in tighter circles with a look of great self-satisfaction, and took no more notice of Paul. The tears had now come in good earnest. Paul clasped his hands piteously.

"Oh, please, please don't!" he pleaded. "I love them so—and I am sure if I tell them that they are disturbing your friends they won't quarrel any more."

"There are such a lot of quarrellers," said the Comet with a shake of the head.

"Yes, but if you told everyone that they were making the stars go out of tune, I am sure they would stop—I am sure they would. It's only that they don't understand—I didn't understand myself, you know. Oh, please—please!"

Poor Paul was quite desperate. The Comet bit the end of its tail. In spite of its scowl it was evidently not at all hard-hearted.

"It's as much as my job's worth," it said.

"Oh, please, please, don't blow them up this time! I will tell them, and perhaps they will love each other again. Do go away just this once more!"

"You're frightened!" said the Comet, evidently rather flattered.

"'Cause I love them so!" Paul repeated frantically. "You might listen to me! I never quarrel—at least, only when Dorothea pulls my hair—and I am sure it would make *you* cross if someone pulled your hair!" Which was rather tactless of Paul, because the Comet was distinctly bald. However, it seemed to take no offence, merely closing one eye thoughtfully.

"That's true," it admitted. "You're quite a good little boy as humans go. I've half a mind to make you into a starlet. I'm sure you would keep in excellent tune."

"I'd rather be with mother!" Paul answered, sobbing.

The Comet looked offended.

"You don't know what's good for you," it said. "A starlet is a first-class position for a beginner. All the little girls and boys who get tired of earth become starlets."

But the offer had no attractions for Paul. He was thinking of his mother, and longing for her with all the strength of his aching heart.

"Oh, please, please," he sobbed.

The Comet wiped its eyes with the end of its tail. It was evidently rather affected, and losing brilliancy.

"Tut! tut!" it said. "You mustn't cry—there's a good little boy! You're taking all the shine out of me. There, now, suppose I send a message to your parents instead—will you stop?"

Paul looked up eagerly.

"I won't ever cry again!" he promised—"or, at least, not half so often."

"Well, tell them they are not to quarrel any more—that they are to think less of themselves and more of each other, that they are to love each other, because nothing else in the world matters. If they do what I tell them, I *may*—I say I *may*—let you all off this once."

"Oh, thank you, dear Mr Halley!" Paul cried, clapping his hands in a transport of delight and relief. The Comet scowled.

"Don't!" it said. "My name isn't Halley—it's Airiosparklorum. Anyhow, mind what I have told you! If I hear any more of your parents disturbing the Spheres, I shall come back seventy-six years before my time and blow you up—every one of you. Now I must hurry along and deliver messages to the other quarrellers. Good-bye! You're not a bad little boy as boys go. Good-bye!" It held out the end of its tail, which Paul shook warmly. "And tell Dorothea she is not to pull your hair!" the Comet said from a long way off. . . .

Paul opened his eyes. For the moment he could not think what had happened. Then he saw that

his mother was leaning over him. She was very pale, and the full sunlight which poured in through the open window showed that the usually laughing, happy eyes were red with crying.

"My dear, dear little Paul!" she whispered.

He tried to put his arms about her neck, but he felt so funny and weak that they fell back limply upon the counterpane.

"I'm so glad you have come back," he said—"so glad! Cook said you had gone because you didn't love us—father and me—because you loved your dresses more. It wasn't true, was it?"

Mrs Godfrey laughed brokenly.

"Of course not, darling. I was silly and cross; but when trouble came—when my little Paul fell ill—I knew—what I really loved."

Paul nodded.

"That's what the Comet said," he muttered under his breath, but his mother did not hear him.

"And I was so cruel, and left you all to yourself!" she said remorsefully. "But it shall never happen again. Father and I will take you away—far, far into the country, where you can get well and strong, and we shall all be so happy together."

"I'm so glad it wasn't true," he said huskily.

Mrs Godfrey buried her face in the pillow beside the fair head. She could not speak, and it was her husband who bent over her and put his arm tenderly about her.

"You poor wee fellow!" he said, smiling down into his son's face, and his own face was at once sadder

and happier than Paul had ever seen it. It was as though he had passed through some great trial and had come out better and stronger. "You poor wee fellow!" he repeated. "You have not been very well, and have been talking such nonsense that you frightened us. But you are better now, aren't you?"

"I am quite well, thank you," Paul answered, feebly. "I have been having such a long talk with Mr Halley—Mr Airiosparklorum, I mean—the Comet."

His father shook his head. A puzzled, troubled look overshadowed his face.

"What comet, dear?"

"The one with the tail, you know." And then, in a dry, husky little voice he told his story as I have told it you. "It told me to tell you that you weren't to quarrel any more," he said at the end—"that you were to love each other—because nothing else matters. Will you, please?"

Mr Godfrey took his wife's hand.

"What do you say, Jean?" he asked, not very steadily. "Shall we promise this—this Mr Airiosparklorum?"

And Mrs Godfrey buried her face in her husband's shoulder.

"For Paul's sake"—she whispered—"I think we might."

Paul closed his eyes. Perhaps he knew that everything was going to be happier than it had ever been before, for he smiled.

"I hope the Comet knows!" he murmured, as he fell asleep.

THE GREAT MAN'S WIFE

HE was a great man—his friends said so, and he felt that it was true—consequently, it was essential that he should live as a great Man and bear about him all the insignia of his greatness. He knew—his friends and his experience told him—that the world has but small faith in greatness which lives in garrets, so he took an elegantly furnished flat in the West End, and waited and worked for the sure glory that was to come. The waiting was not always easy, because, although it was undoubtedly true that he was the Man of the Future, the Present took no notice of him, except to show him its unpleasant but all too realistic side of unpaid bills, unsold MSS., and a fretful wife.

It was of his wife that Norman Ingram was thinking as he sat over the last chapters of the book which was to hasten the lagging footsteps of success. Immediately over his writing-table there hung a looking-glass, in which he saw the reflection of his own clever face, and, beyond that, the comfortable room, and his wife, seated by the table like a little drab shadow in a world of taste and apparent opulence. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Women change quicker than men," he thought. "What a difference two years have made!" Undoubtedly he was right. The picture which memory conjured up before his mental vision had but little in common with the reflection in the looking-glass. Two years before she had been a pretty little creature, with bright hazel eyes, golden hair, and a general atmosphere of freshness indefinitely connected with the thought of flowered muslins and shady picture hats. "Fairy-like" had been his description of her, and he had been angry with his relations who had called her a pink-and-white-faced doll. He had been angrier still when they had warned him that she would wear badly in the storm and stress of his literary career. Now, he wondered. He did not mean to be in the least disloyal, but a man's thoughts are not always in his control, and he could not help recalling the old criticisms—and even her own words.

"You know, dear," she had said, "I am not a bit clever—not clever enough for a man like you. I sha'n't be able to help you as I should, and I dare say I shall not always understand you. Are you sure I shall make you so happy?" And he had reassured her with the absolute self-confidence and enthusiasm which was part of his genius. But now — he wondered!

It is not very agreeable for a great man to have to admit that he has made a fatal mistake in his life, and Norman Ingram was almost thankful when the clatter of a falling work-basket put an end to his reflections. He turned slowly in his chair,

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"*Now* what has happened?" he said. He had spoken patiently, almost indulgently, but she started like a scolded child.

"I am awfully sorry, Norman," she stammered. "I will pick them up in a minute, and then I will see about your supper. I won't disturb you."

He watched her critically as she bent down collecting the scattered articles. His eye, made keen and pitiless by disappointment and overwork, noted the untidy hair, the blouse which a bent safety-pin had not succeeded in keeping united to the unbrushed skirt, the down-at-heel shoes.

She must have felt his glance, for her usually pale face was crimson as she got up. "I won't disturb you," she repeated, hurrying out of the room.

Ingram went on writing. He wrote with the feverish haste of a man flying from his own thoughts, and presently he lost himself in the joy of his work. Work was his chief refuge from the irritations of the Present, the great source of hope for the Future. He believed in himself intensely, and, above all things, he believed in the triumph of the book and in the happiness and freedom from care which it would open out for him. His wife loved money. Then, perhaps, she would have enough.

Presently the clatter of plates and knives put an end to his inspiration.

"Supper is ready," she said. She was putting the last touches to the table as he turned, and he saw that the work had made her, if possible, untidier than before.

"Why, you have only laid for one!" he remarked.

"I have had my supper."

"Where—in the kitchen?"

"Yes." She met his reproving glance with a touch of defiance. "You needn't mind; Jane isn't there."

"Why isn't she there?"

"I sent her away this morning—she was impertinent."

His brows contracted.

"It seems you cannot keep a servant in the place," he said. "I suppose it is your want of dignity. I wish you would think of *my* dignity sometimes. What will people think—the people on whom, after all, my future depends—when my wife opens the door to them, and in that state?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"They will only think I am the servant," she said.

He made no reply, silenced by the obvious truth of her statement. He himself was punctilious in his personal appearance and surroundings, and such new friends of his who did not know the truth would only observe that Ingram had engaged a somewhat slatternly housemaid. The thought goaded him, but he checked the tide of reproach that rushed to his lips—knowing, perhaps, that it would be of no avail—and began his supper. It was a good supper, for though the Ingrams were poor, food was always plentiful, and presently he looked up in a kindlier mood. She had taken her seat opposite him, and was watching him eat with quiet, vacant eyes.

"The book is getting on like a house on fire," he

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said, with an effort to appear unconcerned, and unconsciously screwing his fashion of speaking down to her level. "It will soon be finished."

"How soon?" she asked. The look of vacancy gave place to one of eager interest.

"Oh, in a week or two."

"And then you will sell it?"

"I hope so."

"And get lots of money?"

Instantly his face clouded. It was the note upon which she always harped, and it jarred on his ears like an ugly discord.

"The chief thing is my fame—my reputation," he said sharply. She sighed.

"Yes, of course. But the money would be nice, wouldn't it?" He got up as though he had been stung, and with a sudden impulsive movement she followed him and slipped her arm through his.

"Won't you read me a little of the book?" she pleaded. "I should so like it." He looked down into the wistful face. He saw through the little device to regain his favour. He knew, too, that she would not understand, and that his patience would not bear the strain of explanation. At the same time he wanted some one to read his book, he wanted sympathy, criticism, encouragement—all the things which a great man needs. And he ought to give her the chance. It was only fair.

"I will read you the first chapters," he said.

He read well, and what he read was the very best he had to give. It was the first work of his full

maturity. He felt its strength, its appeal, and something in him melted the hardness and bitterness, and his voice was rich with a new enthusiasm and hope. He read to the end of the first chapter, and then he looked up.

"Well?" he said. She was leaning a little forward, her head bowed, and he waited with an almost tense expectancy. It was as though the whole of their future happiness depended on her answer.

"It sounds very nice," she said at last. "But do you think people will buy it? I mean, you used to write such pretty little things."

"They were trivial pot-boilers," he said between his teeth. "Anybody could have written them."

"Yes, I suppose so; but people liked them, and you were so well paid." His nervous fingers tightened on the manuscript.

"Shall I go on?" he asked. She leant back in her chair.

"Yes, please. I like it so much." He bit his lip to stop the inclination to burst into an ugly laugh. She had called the great effort of his genius "nice." She had judged it by the only standard which she recognised, and had hidden her disappointment under a compliment as transparent as it was fatuous. What had he expected? He hardly knew. He read three or four pages to hide what was passing across his face, and then he put the manuscript aside and looked up.

"I am very sorry, Nora," he began; "but I can't read to you. It's no good——" He stopped short.

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His wife's head was thrown back against the dark red of the chair. Her eyes were shut, and she was sleeping quietly and breathing like a child. He rose to his feet, and stood a moment looking down at her. She was so frail and slight that the armchair seemed to swallow her up, and the dull evening light made her face look thinner and older than he had ever seen it. A grey disfiguring shadow had fallen over the charm and grace that he had once loved. Whose fault was it? He had married a child, and she had remained a child. She had married a man for the wealth that in her mind was the sure attendant on genius. They had disappointed each other. That was all. There was no one to blame.

He threw back his shoulders. He longed for fresh air, and the room was stifling. The very windows, looking out on to a straggling row of chimney-pots, seemed to have grown smaller. Or was it his life which was being suffocated; was it that he had suddenly become conscious of the prison which he had himself built, and from whence there was no escape? The thought maddened him, and he turned and crept away, closing the door after him.

II

The Ingrams, by force of circumstances, lived in the top flat, where the stairs narrowed and the air of fat prosperity which seemed painted on the very doors of the second and third floor neighbours gave place to a thinly varnished poverty. As a rule, the fact annoyed Ingram; but this evening his eye was not

offended by this outward and all too visible sign of the truth, for the good reason that it was shrouded in an opaque darkness. The darkness, assisted by a genuine London fog, had come on with unusual rapidity, and as yet no lamps were lighted. On the third floor Ingram stumbled against someone. A woman's unsteady laugh answered his apologies.

"Is that Mr Ingram? Oh, I am so glad. I was almost frightened. The servants are out, and I dropped my latch-key, and have been groping about for I don't know how long. Have you a match?" Obedient to the suggestion he struck a light, and the pale reflection fell on a face which he remembered to have seen once before, though when and where he could not be sure.

"I beg your pardon," he said hesitatingly. "I know, of course, that we are neighbours, but your name——"

"Is Mrs Norton," she supplemented, smiling. "I called on your wife a few weeks ago, but a great man is not likely to remember such a small event."

"I am not a great man," he expostulated, as he recovered the lost latch-key, "and I have not forgotten. I remember, on the contrary, being very grateful to you. I had some work on at the time, and my wife was badly in want of some one to chatter to."

"Poor man!" she said. Her tone was a trifle mocking, but so inflected that it suggested an under-current of real sympathy.

"And now it is my turn to come to the rescue!"

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Ingram said. He had opened the door, and now began to switch on the lights in the entrance hall. "You can see for yourself that the place is free from burglars and hobgoblins," he added. She laughed.

"And even if it were infested with them I shouldn't mind!" she declared. "When there is light I am always heroic." There seemed some truth in the boast. The nervous fear had gone out of her face, and her dark eyes sparkled with a debonaïr gaiety which made her appear almost beautiful. As a matter of fact, she was not beautiful. Her features were somewhat coarse and harsh, but they bore the stamp of character and temperament, and on Ingram, overfed with faded prettiness, they acted like a pleasing, invigorating wine. For a moment she stood watching him, then she spread out her hands with a delicate gesture of distress.

"How tired you must be!" she exclaimed. "Is it the book your wife told me about which makes you look—like that?"

"I did not know my wife had told you anything," he answered, surprised. "But whatever the cause, I am rather done up. I was going out for some fresh air when we collided." She opened a door leading into what seemed a boudoir.

"You must come with me," she said. "There is one sure remedy for nerves in your state, and I have it." He followed without protest. Her manner was so frank, so free from all formality and artificial reserve, that he felt it would be both insulting and churlish to hold back. Besides, he was attracted, and

the feeling of being suffocated by the circumstances of his life was slipping away from him. He already breathed more easily.

"There!" she cried. "The coffee is waiting to be made. A match, another cup, and in five minutes you shall be drinking something that cannot be had elsewhere in all London. Coffee is my one luxury, because it is my one comfort." He seated himself in the chair to which she directed him. Her last words had roused his sympathy and interest. The room, like herself, pleased him by its elegance and unconventionality. The sweet savour of the coffee reminded him of older, freer days. Everything seemed to conspire to give him the sense of returning vitality.

"What is that you have in your pocket?" his hostess asked, as she handed him his cup. "I know I must seem very curious, but it looks like part of a manuscript—part of the book, perhaps?" He started, and drew out a few sheets of closely written paper.

"Why, yes!" he said. "You are right. Just before I went out I was reading to my wife, and must absent-mindedly have slipped these into my pocket. I am glad you told me. I might have lost them, and they are very precious—to me, at least." She sat opposite him, her face grave and thoughtful.

"She is a very lucky woman," she said.

"Who? My wife? Because I read to her?" She nodded, and he laughed outright. "She fell asleep over it," he said. Mrs Norton made no remark. She lifted her dark eyes to his, and suddenly her silence became illuminated with a meaning which he

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understood and could not resent. Only the old feeling of bitterness revived with redoubled strength.

"You know," she said, "I have often envied your wife—often. I am a lonely woman, and have been lonely for a long time. Sometimes the loneliness becomes unbearable. It was like that to-night, and so I threw Mrs Grundy out and invited you in." She smiled whimsically. "Don't misunderstand me. It is not physical loneliness I mean. An ordinary person like myself can always collect a crowd round her if she wants. No; it is the intellectual loneliness. Perhaps you know it?"

"Yes," he said. Their eyes met again, and it was as though they exchanged a secret message of understanding.

"That is why I have envied your wife," she went on. "I have often imagined you together—the give-and-take of your lives, you sharing with her your genius, she strengthening you with her love and sympathy. Yes, I have envied you both, but being a woman I have envied her most." He said nothing. His sense of loyalty kept him silent, but her words had fanned his bitterness to a new flame. She had drawn a picture of what might have been and could never be. Suddenly she lent forward, and laid her hand on the manuscript. "I know I am a stranger to you," she said, "but to me you are no stranger. I knew you long ago when I read your first book. Otherwise I would not venture to make so strange a request. Will you read me a little of what you have written?" He looked at her, and for a moment

hesitated. Then the genius in him, the side of his nature which thirsted after sympathy and understanding, rose uppermost and claimed its due.

"I would be grateful if you would listen," he said.

Two hours later he re-entered his own sitting-room. The light was burning, and his wife, heavy-eyed and disorderly, was arranging some cups and saucers upon the table.

"The coffee has been waiting so long, Norman," she said, and her voice sounded fretful. "I'm afraid it must be rather cold." It was quite cold—and it was bad. Ingram pushed the cup on one side.

"No, thank you," he said. "I don't want any." She looked at him, and then impulsively put her hand on his.

"Norman, you are cross because I went to sleep. I am so sorry. I was a little tired, you know. Won't you go on reading to me now?"

"No," he answered; "it is too late." He turned away as he spoke. In his own ears his carelessly spoken words rang with an unsought-for significance.

III

The little clock on the mantelpiece struck six. Ingram, who had been listlessly turning over the leaves of his manuscript, looked up, and slipped the closely-written sheets back into the drawer. It was finished. He felt somehow as though an epoch in his life had closed, and a new and greater one had opened out before him.

"It will make you famous," she had said, "and I

shall have my secret share in your triumph." That had been yesterday, when he had read her the last chapter. With that last chapter the excuse for their companionship had ended, and yet as the clock had struck the hour when he had been wont to go to her with his day's work he had started as though a long and tedious waiting was over. It was a moment in which an ordinary man would have caught a glimpse of his danger and turned back. But Ingram was not an ordinary man. He was a great man, and it is the privilege of greatness to ignore what is unpleasant and to live in a self-created world of fancy, where the laws and morals of other mortals play no part. Thus Ingram was unconscious of any conflicting emotions as he went towards the door. At the door, however, he looked back and saw that his wife had risen from her seat. He did not know why he looked back at her. For the last six weeks she had been no more than a shadow passing noiselessly backwards and forwards across his horizon; and even now as she stood there, dimly silhouetted against the window, she seemed only a frail, piteous ghost of what had once been.

"How pale you are!" he said. "You should be out in the fresh air more. How would it be if I sent you away for a little—in the country? Now that the book is finished, money won't be so scarce."

"Yes," she said slowly; "perhaps it would be a good thing."

He nodded with an assumption of cheerfulness.

"Well, we will talk about it when I come back. I am going out for a little. Good-bye!" He had

never told her his real destination. He felt that she would not understand his new friendship, and that there would be "scenes"—of all things, the most detestable. But to-night he hesitated. She had left her place by the window, and suddenly, almost before he knew what was happening, she had slipped her thin arms about his neck, and drawing him down to her own height, kissed him softly on his cheek.

"Good-bye, dear Norman!" she whispered.

"Why!" he said, laughing, "what a formal farewell—as though we were parting for ever!" He did not wait for her answer, but went out suddenly. His instinct, groping through the darkness of the future, had made him afraid of his own words.

Eleonor Norton was waiting for him. As he entered the shadowy room where he had spent so many hours of ease and refreshment, she advanced to meet him, and took his hand in hers.

"I knew you would come," she said; "I was sure of you." Somehow her words stirred him to an unexpected evasion.

"I wanted to ask you something—about the book," he said.

She laughed.

"About the book? Ah, yes—of course. Sit down and tell me." But he had nothing to tell her, and he knew she had seen through the excuse as he had seen through it himself. Even *he* could not wilfully remain blind for ever. He sat silent, with his hand covering his face. The rest and peace which he had associated with Eleonor Norton and

her surroundings had gone. Instead, he felt as though the quiet room had become the scene of a struggle between two forces, of which one was her will. After a moment she drew his hand gently away, so that his face was no longer hidden from her dark scrutiny.

"Your book is finished," she said. "You know as well as I do that it is a great work, and will make you famous. Yet you are not happy. Why not?"

He clenched his hands in a movement of uncontrollable despair.

"It is because I have gone too far!" he said roughly. "Your friendship, your sympathy, have become indispensable to me—and yet it cannot go on. It is impossible." Her eyes had never left his face, and he stopped short as though they hypnotised him.

"Yes," she said in a low voice; "I know it cannot go on. I must return to my loneliness—you to yours. I cannot tell which of us will suffer most. You will have your fame, but I do not think it will comfort you. *She* will not understand. I know her sort so well. She will only be able to count it out in gold and silver; but *I* should have understood. *Her* love cannot teach her. *Mine*——" She stopped, as though she had been carried away by her emotion, and regretted her own words. He was pacing the room feverishly. He had grown afraid—afraid of himself, of her, and, above all, of that subtle power which she had gained over him. "Norman," she whispered, "if only we were not such cowards!" In dead silence they faced each

other. He saw her hands outstretched towards him; her eyes held his ~~fixed~~ riveted with their silent appeal; and then, in the same instant as he took a stumbling step towards her, she uttered a short, high scream, which cut like a knife through the meshes of her fascination.

"Look!" she screamed, "look!" Following her horror-stricken stare, he swung round. For a moment he saw nothing. Then he tore the door open. The thin, snake-like streak of smoke had become a broad column; on the staircase it was a sea—thick, suffocating, and lit by unsteady, flickering points of fire. With a movement of decision he slammed the door to.

"Quick!" he said. "Save yourself by the iron ladder outside the window. The whole building must be on fire. Where are the servants?"

She rushed to him, and clung wildly to his arm.

"Oh, I don't know—they are out. Save me—for God's sake, save me!"

He tried to loosen her desperate grip.

"Let me go, Mrs Norton!" he cried sternly. "You are safe if you do as I tell you. Come!" He half dragged her to the window, and flung it open. "Quick!" he commanded. "I have not a minute to lose. I must go to my wife." The words came to his lips, as they had come to his mind in the first instant of danger, like the rush of a tide which has been suddenly freed from some icy barrier.

She burst into a furious hysterical laugh.

"Your wife! What is she to you? You must save me—she will look after herself—and even if

the worst happened——” She stopped short. The mask of intellect, of glittering temperament, had dropped, and behind it the distorted face revealed the woman as she was—a tawdry thing, half evil, half pitiable. For an instant he looked at her with a cold impartiality as sudden as his former intoxication had been slow and insidious. Neither beauty nor power nor charm were left her; only a horrid cowardice wrote itself in the weak, trembling lips and twitching features. She saw the change in his face, and her fear increased to frenzy. “Norman,” she stammered, “save me. Don’t think of her—you must think of me!”

He tried to free himself.

“Mrs Norton, I must go to my wife.”

“No, no; you can’t leave me. I can’t go down there alone—I should fall.” She was whimpering like a child. “Save me, Norman; save me!”

The smoke had entered the room, and was creeping along the floor in thick, threatening waves. He no longer saw the face of the miserable woman beside him—it had become a blank; he was thinking of that other woman upstairs, dying a hideous, lonely death. And she was his wife!

“Let me go!” he cried in a fury of despair. “I must!” But it was useless. She clung to him with a tenacious strength which nothing could shake, and every moment’s struggle might mean an irreparable loss. Swiftly he measured the distance to the ground. In five minutes he could be down with her and up again. It was the one chance. He

seized the half-delirious woman in his arms, and, clambering out off to the window-sill, began the descent. Below him he heard the shouts of the crowd warning him to hasten, but he had no need of their warnings. He was goaded by a fear which concerned neither his own life nor that of the woman who clung to him. If he were not in time—if she were dead! Eleonor Norton had fainted. She lay in his free arm a dead, paralysing weight, so that the veins stood out upon his forehead, and his breath came like a hard-drawn groan. But of all this he was totally unconscious. Before his dizzy, half-closed eyes he saw the piteous little shadow of the woman he had deserted; on his mind was scorched the memory of their parting in letters of endless self-reproach, and when at last the bottom of the ladder was reached, he flung his burden from him as a man flings away the price of his perdition.

"Where is my wife?" he shouted. The old watchman of the mansions broke through the swaying, excited crowd.

"Sir, she was here ten minutes ago, dressed to go out; but when she heard there was a fire she ran back before I could stop her."

"Which way?"

"The front stairs." Ingram shook off the detaining hands. With maniacal strength he broke through the ring of firemen into the doomed building. No one dared to follow him. Alone, guided only by his instinct, he fought his way up through the choking, blinding columns of smoke. In his imagina-

tion he heard her calling him; his awakened conscience echoed her gentle childish voice and spurred him to an effort which was almost superhuman. For the moment he was invulnerable, irresistible. Only when he at last saw her standing out against the red background of fire he stopped short, and a cry burst from his aching, suffocating lungs.

"Nora!" he cried. "Nora!" The clouds drifted aside, and for an instant he saw her face clearly. It was radiant, beautiful with strength and a strange happiness.

"I have it!" she answered joyously. "It is safe!" Her words bore no meaning for him, though afterwards he remembered them. He saw a red tongue flash out at her from the grey fog, and with the strength of despair he caught her in his arms.

"Nora!" he gasped, "if this is the end, forgive me—as I love you." Then he clenched his teeth, and swayed down the cracking, swollen staircase like a drunken man. It was a five minutes' struggle between failing physical strength and a soul seeking to save itself from the curse of eternal remorse. Then a breath of cold air, a burst of cheering, a hideous crash of yielding masonry behind him told him that he had passed out of the zone of death into safety. He laid his burden tenderly on the ground. He bent over her, calling her by name. He tried to loosen the tightly folded arms. As he did so, a smothered cry burst from his lips. He knew now why in the midst of panic her face had been full of so grand a joy. He knew now why she had turned

back. For against the quiet, motionless breast she held the singed bundle of his manuscript.

Ingram knelt down by his wife's bedside. Gently he loosened the gripping fingers from their tenacious hold, and drew away the bundle of papers which spelt for him the future. No other hand had been able to remove them, but her grip relaxed to his touch, as though even in her trance-like slumber she knew him and gave back to him what was his own. A sheet of note-paper fell out from the first few leaves of the manuscript. It was addressed to him in the scrawling, untidy hand he knew so well, and for a moment he looked at it with eyes that could not see, do what he would. Then he conquered himself and read :

"My darling husband," she had written, "I am putting this between the leaves so that you will see it, and I want you to know why I am going away from you. It is not because I do not love you, but because I think you will be happier. I know you have found someone clever, like yourself, who understands you better than I do—and whom you understand. I am not necessary to you any more. I have known it already many weeks, but I said nothing because you were in the middle of your book, and it would only have disturbed you. And I disturbed you so often. Dearest, I was not the right wife for you. I ought to have known it from the beginning, and perhaps I did, only I loved you so, and I thought my love would make up. But

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it hasn't. So I think it only fair to set you free. Don't think too badly of me, my husband. Don't believe I was only thinking of the money—never of your fame. I did think of your fame—so much that I did not tell you why I was always thinking of the money. It would have worried you, and I knew that you were not to be worried. You are a great man, and that is perhaps why you do not understand or see the petty things in life, the little struggles, the little heartaches. You did not understand, for instance, that though you needed luxury and comfort, it was sometimes hard to pay for it. But it was hard, and sometimes I was so tired—so tired with trying—that I couldn't be to you what you wanted. I couldn't be tidy and gay and bright. When you read to me I couldn't even listen. I had always to be thinking of the bills and the money that never came. Once I fell asleep over it all, and you were hurt. But I was so tired; Norman, you will never understand how such a little thing can tire a woman. Don't think I am making excuses. It is only I want you to understand that, though I have failed you, it is not for want of love. I often wonder, had I been less tired, if I should have failed you, if after all I might have been less stupid, more your companion. I wonder! But I know—I have lost you. It is too late for us to begin again, and so I am going away."

Ingram buried his face in the white coverlet. His eyes, freed from the blinding spectacles of his egoism, read more than she had written. His ears, no longer

filled with the clamour of self-flattery, heard the echo of the doctor's words, and now he knew that he understood them.

"The shock would have been less had she been stronger—the burns themselves are trivial," the good man had said, with a puzzled frown. "Were it not for the circumstances I should say she was half-starved. It will be weeks before she is herself again." The circumstances! He had looked down upon her with a good-natured pity, and she had starved herself for his sake. He had turned from her as his mental inferior, because she had made herself his servant, unpaid and unthanked. He had despised her as a weak child, and she had fought *his* battle in dogged heroic silence. He had deserted her, and in the same hour she had risked her life to serve him. He lifted his ashy face. Her eyes were open, and she was smiling brightly at him.

"Don't cry, Norman," she whispered; "don't cry!"

"Nora!" he cried brokenly. "Nora!"

In a great crisis of life, when the darkness is swept away and two human beings face each other in the full light of understanding, few words are needed. Ingram laid his head on his wife's breast, and she kissed him. That was all. But in that moment they changed places. By the simple power of sacrifice she had risen above him, leaving him in the dust of an all-healing humiliation. In the higher greatness of nobility she had become his teacher.

And because at the bottom he *was* really a great man, he knew it, and thanked God that the chance would be given him to make amends in the future.

RED STAR

I

HE had been complaining about his sight all day ; but Fenton, himself half-blinded by the reflection from the endless stretch of burning sand, had given no heed to his broken exclamations, but had gone on, his head bent, his lips stoically compressed. Now, however, his companion pulled up his horse and shook him by the arm with half-angry impatience.

"What's the matter with the sun?" he demanded hoarsely. "Where is it? I don't see it." Fenton shaded his eyes and frowned at the distant horizon melting into the gold and amber of the evening sky. Then he glanced quickly at Courtney's sharp, attenuated profile.

"There's nothing the matter with the sun," he said. "It is going down fast. We shall have night in an hour." Courtney turned in his saddle. His wide-open eyes, which seemed insensitive to the horizontal rays of light falling on his face, sought Fenton's, but missed them by a full inch.

"I don't see you either," he said. "What on earth has happened to me?"

"It's the desert blindness," Fenton returned, spurring on his horse. "The only wonder is that we haven't both got it. Come on!" He spoke brutally with a kind of cynical indifference, which was perhaps the best medicine he could have administered. The spasm of pain twisting Courtney's features passed away, leaving them sternly composed. He pushed his staggering horse closer to Fenton's.

"You had better take the reins," he observed quietly. "The beast might bolt, and I should be lost for good."

Fenton burst into a short sand-choked laugh, but he said nothing, and for an hour the two men rode on in unbroken silence. The red rim of the sun had sunk out of sight when Courtney suddenly held out his hand as though groping for his companion.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I can't go on. This thirst is killing me. And the darkness is like a wall. If I could only rest a little——" Fenton made no answer, but swung himself out of the saddle and helped the blind man to alight.

"I'll wrap you up in one of the blankets, and perhaps you'll be able to sleep and forget," he said. "The rest will give the horses a chance, poor brutes."

"And you?"

"I shall watch. I can't sleep." He threw one of the saddle blankets about Courtney's shoulders and tried to settle him more comfortably on the still hot sand. Courtney submitted with the piteous dependence of blindness, and for a moment lay quiet, his sightless eyes lifted to the darkening sky.

"It's a bad mess," he said suddenly. "I suppose

we are about done for. It doesn't matter much about me. No one will miss me or be any the worse off if I disappear from the earth's surface. But you are different. The world has need of you. You have a great future before you. I meant to give you a real chance, old fellow, but it has gone wrong. I'd give my life to put it right."

"I am accustomed to my chances going wrong," was the bitter answer. Fenton turned to the horses and removed the bags slung across the saddles. He opened one and put in his hand. A few dates, a small water-bag half full—that was all. He let the dates run through his fingers, mentally counted them, and divided them into two parts. Then he glanced at the man lying at his feet. By an unearthly silver light which seemed to emanate from the stars and to hover like a white, formless ghost above the sand, he saw that Courtney's eyes were closed and that he slept. Fenton sank down beside him and lay at full length, his hands clasped behind his head. It was useless to awake the exhausted man and to tell him that in all probability they were doomed to starvation. Therefore he lay motionless, and the awful quiet of the desert sank into his soul and filled it with the sense of approaching death. He felt that to all intents and purposes he was a dying man, and his thoughts were gloomily retrospective. The past moved slowly before his mental vision, whilst his eyes, lifted to the clear heavens, fixed themselves at first unconsciously on one particular star. It stood apart, isolated from its paler sisters by its own radiance, a

brilliant eye of light tinged with a faint crimson, which deepened with the surrounding darkness. He watched it, fascinated, and as it hung above him it was as though its rays lengthened till they pierced through to his very brain and mingled with his thoughts, fighting their gloom with a fiery, passionate regret. For in this last reckoning he knew that his life had been a failure. Fifteen years before he had entered the medical profession armed with a genius which had been his undoing. He had been too clever to plod the ways of ordinary men. His mind had disdained routine, and had plunged, reckless of material gain, into the unbeaten track of science, seeking some great discovery. He had failed—because he was too poor and thus too helpless. And then, at the supreme moment of his life, when his enfeebled hands had clutched at a secret which was to bring light into the darkness of suffering thousands, Courtney — rich, globe-trotting Courtney — had reappeared in his life and had offered him his chance.

"You say you have discovered a new and wonderful operation," he had said. "It may be true, but you can prove nothing as you are. You are on the verge of breakdown. Come with me. Win back your strength in other surroundings. After that you can prove what you like." And he had gone, thankful for his own sake and for the sake of those he hoped to help. Little by little health and power had crept back to him. He had felt his blood flow swifter; he had seen how his hand had steadied. And then Fate had struck him down. Fate, his enemy,

had tempted them out on to the great desert. Fate had laughed out of the furious sand-storm which had cut them from their untrustworthy guides and thrust them out into a trackless, unknown wilderness. He knew Fate. He hated her as she hated him, and as he lay there staring upwards, a wave of savage revolt against her swept over him. It was as though the star on which his sombre eyes were still fixed had set fire to his brain and kindled in it a desperate rage that was like madness. He could not die, not though death sat in his throat and choked him with its first torture. He could not die, because on his life hung the welfare, the happiness of thousands. They rose before him, pale, sorrowful ghosts, calling to him out of the depths of their misery to help them. And he knew that he could help them—if he lived. He sat up and drew the water-bag to him, weighing it in his hand. One man might live two days on its contents. And in two days the track might be recovered.

One man! He threw back his head with a sudden jerk, and the light falling on his face revealed it as indefinitely changed. His jaw had dropped, his starting eyes had a look of horror in them as though some hideous spectre had risen out of the shimmering sand before him.

For a long time he sat there in the same rigid attitude, his teeth chattering as the icy night air cut against his face. But there was fever in his blood. Presently he rose softly to his feet. Quiet as his movement had been, it sounded loud and startling in the penetrating stillness, and he waited a moment,

breathless with suspense. The sleeping man did not stir. Fenton bent down as though he would have touched the passive hand lying half opened on the sand; then he drew back. His own hand shook. Yet he did not hesitate as he attached the saddle bags and led the weary horses out of hearing. He did not turn back—save once when it seemed to him that a voice called to him out of the darkness. But there was no change. The black speck lying in the pool of moonlight had not moved. Only the red star had left its place. It had followed him. It followed him as he galloped alone into the waste, hanging above his head like a luminous spot of blood in the jewelled heavens.

II

Dr William Fenton took the card from the tray which the liveried servant held out to him, glanced at it, and then threw it indifferently on the table.

"Show them in here," he said. When the servant had gone he went back to his writing-table, and, seating himself, became engrossed in the book before him. As his two visitors entered, his attitude was one of complete absorption, almost indicating that their existence was already forgotten; yet he rose immediately afterwards, and there was no lack of kindly welcome in his manner when he advanced to greet them.

"Very glad to meet you, Doctor Neil," he said. "Pray be seated."

The little man bowed. As a young doctor with a

small and poor practice, this moment in the presence of the newest star on the professional horizon was for him the greatest moment in his life. Thus his bow was a little awkward and his manner nervous.

"Allow me first to introduce my patient," he said, half turning to his companion and drawing him out of the shadow. "It is on his account that I have ventured to disturb you."

There was a moment's silence. The stranger took a stumbling step forward, and bowed his head uncertainly in Fenton's direction.

"I beg your pardon," he said, "but I cannot see you. I am blind."

He lifted his face for the first time to the light and directed his eyes full on Fenton's face. Dr Neil glanced also at his colleague, fancying he had uttered an exclamation, but evidently Fenton had not spoken. His lips were tightly set, and after a moment he turned and went back to his writing-table. There he stood fumbling with some papers, and it was a curiously long time before he seemed to remember that he was not alone. At last he turned and looked at them, and there was something in his attitude which was either defiant or—as the little doctor thought—merely arrogant.

"You must excuse me for not having sent up my patient's name with my own," Neil began again hastily; "but it was impossible for me to do so. Extraordinary as it may sound, I do not know his name, and he does not know it himself. Added to his blindness, he has completely lost his memory, owing,

we presume, to some great mental shock which, of course, he cannot remember." He stopped, and it was evident that Fenton was expected to say something.

"A great shock," he repeated mechanically. He sank back into his chair, and sat with his head bowed and his fingers loosely interlaced in an attitude of apparent thought.

"Pray be seated," he said again. "I—it is deeply interesting." His tone belied his words. It rang almost indifferent, and there was indifference in his manner as he watched Dr Neil lead the blind man to the chair opposite the window. Nevertheless, his visitor took confidence.

"It is indeed a most interesting and puzzling affair," he said, warming to his task. "I have given it the whole of my spare attention, and I have no doubt the mystery will soon be cleared up. Two years ago this gentleman was found by some travelling Bedouins on the outskirts of the Sahara. He was blind, and practically dying of thirst and starvation. For a long time he could not speak, and when he did speak he could tell them nothing. His whole past had become a blank. He had money on him which the Bedouins stole, and on that account they hesitated, no doubt, to give him up to the English authorities. They left him finally in a small native town, expecting that he would die there, but a friend of mine found him wandering about the streets and took pity on his frightful condition. Hence my share in the affair. Since then we have made every effort to discover his identity, hitherto without success. He had no

papers about him; and his memory, as I have said, extends no farther than the last two years."

Fenton lifted his head and then shifted his position so that the blind eyes no longer rested on his face.

"You remember nothing?" he asked.

"Nothing. I am only dimly conscious that I must have been fairly well-to-do. I hope, therefore, one day to be able to repay every effort made on my behalf."

"And you wish——?"

"The first step to recovery of memory is the recovery of sight," interposed Dr Neil quickly. "I am convinced that such a recovery is possible, and await your confirmation of my opinion."

Fenton rose. He stood so quiet and silent that the younger man looked up at him in some surprise. Then as he saw the white face and trembling lips, he half sprang to his feet.

"Doctor!" he exclaimed, "you are ill——"

"There is nothing the matter," was the sharp interruption. Fenton had recovered himself instantly, yet his step faltered, and twice he seemed to hesitate as he approached the man seated with his pale, haggard face lifted to the light. Neil, roused to attention by a vague sense of uneasiness, watched his colleague and saw that his hands shook as he touched the blind man's face—shook only slightly, it is true, as though an iron will grasped every quivering nerve and held it in check. The examination lasted half an hour. His passionate love for his work had helped Fenton back to his self-possession, and there was

something like a smothered enthusiasm in his tone as he turned to Neil.

"I believe there is a possibility that the sight may be recovered," he said. "A difficult operation would be necessary, but the chances are all in its favour."

Neil nodded.

"I thought so," he said. "That is why I have come to you."

"To me——?"

"You are the only man who could perform such an operation with any hope of success." Fenton sprang to his feet. For one moment the iron will seemed to yield before some terrible and inexplicable emotion.

"It is impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Impossible?" The younger doctor rose also and faced him. "Surely you do not mean what you say!" he cried, and his tone, beneath its respect, vibrated with long-suppressed indignation. "Dr Fenton, I have heard that the doors of your hospital have never been closed against the most poor, the most forsaken. I have heard that you search out misery—that no one is beyond your merciful powers of healing. And you turn from this man! Consider what it means to him! On his sight depends perhaps his memory, and on his memory his whole future."

"And my future." The protest seemed to burst from Fenton's ashy lips like an uncontrollable cry of desperation. Dr Neil drew himself up.

"Surely your future is not endangered?" he said stiffly. "No doubt the operation would be successful."

"No doubt." Fenton turned on his heel, avoiding

the sternly questioning eyes, but his whole frame betrayed the agitation which mastered him. "It is impossible!" he repeated harshly.

"That is a word a man in your position has no right to use," was the answer. The young face was crimson with mingled scorn and bewilderment. Fenton fought a moment in silence, then he turned again. His passion had suddenly frozen into an icy quiet.

"I have told you that it is impossible," he said. "No doubt the whole operation is impossible—I spoke too hastily. At any rate, I refuse the responsibility."

"You have undertaken other cases—worse cases—and been successful," Neil retorted. A red flame shot into Fenton's eyes.

"You are overbold," he said. "I am free to do what I think best."

Neil shrugged his shoulders and there was silence. Then the blind man rose. His face seemed to have grown thinner, sadder, in those last moments.

"Dr Fenton," he said quietly, "I am blind and have suffered. Will you not help me?"

Fenton caught his breath, as though the sharp, painful sound guided him; the other groped forward, and a cold hand took Fenton's and held it in a clasp eloquent with pleading.

"Will you not help me?" came the piteous repetition. Fenton's lips parted soundlessly. He tried to draw back his hand, but the blind man seemed unconscious of the strange reluctance so visible to Neil's watching eyes. "Your voice gives me confidence," he went on in the same low unsteady tone.

"It has given me hope. I believe in you—in spite of your words. Help me!" With a short, choking exclamation Fenton wrenched himself free.

"I will try—I will do my best," he stammered. "Only—leave me for the present. I am overwrought—overworked. Another time——" He seemed hardly to know what he was saying. He held himself stiffly, resolutely erect until the door closed; then, as the stumbling footsteps of the blind man and his companion died away, he reeled and fell face downwards to the floor.

III

It was the night before the operation. Twice Fenton passed his patient's door, twice came back and stood there, his white face lifted in an attitude of listening. The long corridor lay in darkness. Save for his own quick breathing, there was no sound. After a moment he turned the handle softly and entered. A night-light burned on the table by the bedside. Its tiny yellow rays fell on the sleeping man's face, throwing deep shadows into the hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. For an instant Fenton stood irresolute, then he drew closer. In a scorching flash of recollection another picture rose before his tortured vision—another picture, yet one linked to this by a terrible, poignant analogy. It was the same face, only less haggard, less sorrowful, which had once turned to him in the dim star-light; the same quiet had pressed down upon them both, intensified by the awful desert loneliness—and in his own heart there had raged the

same passions of temptation and fear. He laid his trembling hand on the foot of the bed, steadying himself. It seemed to him that the whole agony of the last few weeks had culminated in this moment. To-morrow was to see the end. To-morrow he was asked to bring his whole skill to bear upon his own ruin. He knew that he could not. He could not face the eyes of the man he had betrayed. He could not meet their dawning recognition. He would have to fail, to throw the first dark stain on his own reputation, rather than risk the greater catastrophe. He bent closer to the unconscious man. A new thought—the slow growth of weeks—was palpitating in his brain. "If only he had died out there—if only he would die *now*!" As though he had spoken aloud, as though the words had been transmitted by some mysterious agency to the ears of the sleeping man, the closed eyes opened and rested full on his face.

"Is that you, doctor?" he said. Fenton took a step back. He knew that those terrible eyes could not see, yet they burned into his soul.

"Yes," he muttered. "I came to see if you were all right. Did I wake you?" The other shook his head.

"No, I was awake."

"You heard me come in?"

"I heard you pass my door—twice."

"You have quick ears."

"In the desert one learns to catch every sound," was the quiet answer, "especially when one is blind and listening for the voice of a friend." Fenton set his teeth. "That is perhaps why I recognise your

step and voice so quickly," the blind man went on. "It seems to me that I know both so well, as though I must have heard them often in that past which I have lost." Fenton sat down on the edge of the bed. A terrible suspicion had seized him. Was the past already reviving in that poor stunned brain? Had the frozen tide of memory already begun to flow? A kind of frenzy of fear bore down every barrier of his caution. The agony of doubt was unendurable. He must find out now and at all costs.

"It is strange that my voice should be familiar to you," he said with an unsteady laugh, "because, as it happens, your story is familiar to *me*. A friend of mine endured much the same fate as you have done. It is an old story, but if you cannot sleep you might care to hear it." The other turned his head a little to the wall. Was it Fenton's excited imagination, or did a sudden colour dye the pale cheeks?

"I should like to hear it," he said.

Fenton bent closer still. In a voice which he strove to render calm and indifferent, but which trembled with suppressed agitation, he began the story of his life. And at every point his eyes greedily searched the passive face against the pillow, waiting for the subtle signal of dawning recollection. But none was given. Even at the climax his listener merely turned his head as though roused to a naturally increased interest. In that moment Fenton forgot his part, forgot caution and danger. He was transported back to that crucial hour of temptation; he suffered again all the agony of fear and desire at desperate war with

a failing loyalty. Unknown to him, his voice rang with the passion of self-vindication.

"He was not a bad man," he said. "Up to that moment he had never harmed so much as an animal. But he lost his head. Was it physical fear? Was it ambition? Was it an honest recognition of his own value to humanity in comparison to that of the other who had neither family nor ties? God knows. He saved himself. He left his friend—as you no doubt were left—to die in the desert. Afterwards, in his remorse he gave himself up to the service of his fellows. He became the willing slave of the miserable and destitute."

"As you have done."

Fenton laughed brokenly.

"Yes, as I have done." He waited a moment, then once more yielded to the tide of hungry curiosity.

"What would you have said to such a man? What judgment would you have pronounced over him?"

The blind man appeared to think earnestly, his fingers playing with the fringe of his coverlet.

"He was a traitor," he said at last. "A traitor to himself and his friend. No man is so valuable that he dare set the example of treachery to save his own life. At the same time it seems to me that over the lives of the very best of us there hangs a star of evil. No one knows of its existence until the hour of darkness. In that hour the noblest man may fall before the unsuspected power of its temptation."

"A star of evil!" Fenton muttered. "A red star!" A faint smile flickered over the other's lips.

"A red star?" he interrogated. "Well, it may be red. I only know that when it shines into a man's life he may—for the moment—fall to the level of a scoundrel. But there will always be this difference between them—the scoundrel will try to cover up the traces of his crime, the good man will atone."

Fenton rose. He could not rid himself of the horrible sensation that he was being watched, that out of the dark corners of the room eyes were fixed on his haggard features, mocking at their agonised self-betrayal.

"Yes," he stammered, "I understand what you mean. Well, good night." He turned as if to go, but the blind man's hand arrested him.

"Doctor, if it isn't too much trouble, would you mind giving me my sleeping draught? It is somewhere on the mantelshef. I can't fetch it myself, because there is another bottle—a blue one, with poison—and I might make a mistake." He laughed quietly. "In that case you would have no trouble with me to-morrow," he added. Fenton went to the mantelshef. The two bottles stood side by side. The blue bottle was labelled with a crimson label. He uncorked it, and smelt its contents, glancing swiftly at his patient.

"Shall I pour you out a dose?" he said.

"If you please." A few drops of the deadly liquid fell into the glass. Fenton was thinking of the to-morrow. Something was telling him that no human being would ever know—that he was saved. In the same instant his eyes, drawn by some invisible power,

passed over the lifted glass to the open window. There were stars in the bright heavens, and one star, ominously bright, flashed through the darkness like an evil watching eye. Fenton let the glass slip through his fingers. The sound of the broken pieces on the hearth rang in his ears, and for a moment he stood petrified, motionless, like a man roused from some frightful nightmare. Then he turned.

"I am sorry," he said. "I let it fall. But there is another glass here." He took the white bottle and poured out the prescribed quantity. His hand was shaking, and there were beads of cold sweat upon his forehead.

"There!" he said. "Drink—drink quickly!" The blind man took the glass and drank its contents in one draught.

"Thank you, doctor," he said.

Fenton turned and stumbled from the room.

IV

"Tell him that I cannot come. I am convinced from your report that his sight is thoroughly re-established. To-morrow he can be discharged." The assistant doctor glanced admiringly at his chief, but ventured no remark, and went out, closing the door after him. It was understandable, he thought, that a great healer should shrink from the praises and thanks of those he had helped to bring back to life and light. And this had been an unusually brilliant case—one that might well bind one man to another by a bond of endless gratitude. Fenton, he considered, had every

reason to be proud. Thus the assistant doctor would not have understood had he seen Fenton fall forward at his table, his face buried in his arms. He would not have understood the despair which gnawed at the heart of his success.

The operation had not failed. For ten days Courtney had regained his sight, and every day he had repeated the demand to see his benefactor. But Fenton had held back, adding excuse to excuse, and to-morrow Courtney was to go. The danger seemed averted, and yet fear stood at Fenton's elbow, unconquerable and intolerable. He felt that he had not escaped, far rather that he was being hunted down by an unseen force, and that every effort of his was but the feeble struggle of a trapped animal against the end.

Why had he not failed? No one could have proved that it was an intentional failure. No one could have guessed the truth. Yet he had not failed. In the middle of the operation, at the crucial instant, something in him had risen stronger than his fear and had driven him relentlessly to a successful issue. Was it once more his genius, his insatiable ambition that had been his undoing? He could not tell. He could not penetrate the depths of his own overburdened soul.

The evening sunshine poured into the room. Fenton lifted his wan face. He felt stifled, and, yielding to impulse, he opened the French windows and stepped out into the garden which surrounded his hospital. Heedless as to his destination, he hurried along the well-kept paths, conscious only of the desire to escape from himself and from the oppressive

thoughts crowding his brain. In former times, when the figure of a blind man wandering through the wilderness, calling for the friend who never came, had risen like a spectre before his imagination, he had turned and looked back at the red brick building surrounded by its lovely gardens, and told himself: "That is your gift to suffering humanity—that is your atonement for that one life." And the spectre had faded. But now it would not leave him. It followed him step by step; its pleading, thirst-stifled voice rose from the ground beneath his feet, and found its echo in every movement of the trees. He walked faster. Unconscious of what he did, he left the hospital grounds behind him and passed over the fields towards the river. His eyes were turned to the ground, striving to escape those other eyes which met his at every side, filled with their silent, terrible condemnation. Thus he saw nothing till the bottom of the hill was reached and the rush of the swift-running river recalled him to his senses. He looked up. Someone was standing in the centre of the rough wooden bridge—a man whom Fenton recognised instantly with a sudden savage leap of the pulse. He knew now why he had come this road. He knew now the power that had guided him. The Nemesis who had tracked him down step by step stood at his elbow, and seemed to laugh in cruel triumph. "See, this is the end!" He stood motionless. If Courtney recognised him—if with recognition returned recollection—then was this indeed the end, and he waited as a man waits upon whose head the long suspended sword of retribution is about to fall.

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Courtney had leant his elbows on the frail balustrade; his face was bent to the turbulent stream, and the gaunt, familiar profile cut itself like a cameo against the evening sky. Fenton's lips moved silently. He was praying like a man possessed. "Oh, God, strike him down—kill him before it is too late." And then Courtney turned his head and looked at him. Their eyes met, and in those which had been blank and sightless there flashed a brilliant light of recognition.

"Fenton!"

A curse burst from Fenton's lips. It was the signal which for him marked the end. He reeled forward, hell in his heart, murder itching in the palms of his clenched hands. In the same instant his prayer was answered. The balustrade against which Courtney had stumbled yielded, and a half-uttered cry was stifled in the swirl of the waters. Fenton ran to the bank. Already yards away a dark speck was being hurried forward in the midst of the churning stream. He saw two hands lifted towards the sky. He heard a voice calling him by name.

"Fenton! Fenton!" The appeal seemed to come from the past, to clutch like a skilled hand at the long silent chords in Fenton's aching heart.

"I am coming!" he shouted. "I am coming!" and plunged into the water. He was a poor swimmer, but by a superhuman effort he reached the drowning man and grasped him.

"Hold on!" he gasped. Two hands clutched him by the shoulder. He felt himself being drawn

down by the new weight, and for a moment the water closed over his head. Twice he struggled up above the surface with his burden, twice sank. He knew that this was the end, and with the knowledge came a new, a wonderful peace.

"Let me go!" Courtney's voice rang in his ear. "Let me go—save yourself!"

It was the last call of temptation. He threw back his head. With an effort, he lifted himself a last time above the water, and as he did so it seemed to him that out of the darkness which was gathering faster and faster before his eyes he saw a light flash—the light of a red star.

"No, no, Courtney—not this time! Please God, not this time!"

Then the darkness became absolute.

How long the darkness lasted he did not know. It thinned at last, and through the veil which slowly lifted from his eye he saw Courtney's face bent over him. For the moment earth seemed to have passed away, and the face to be that of some compassionate angel. He stretched out his hand. It was taken and held in a warm, strong clasp.

"Courtney!" he whispered. The sound of his own voice roused him. He knew that he was alive, and that the hands that held his were those of the man he had wronged. "Who saved us?" he asked.

"No one. I got you to land. I was never in danger, for I am a strong swimmer—but it was your chance."

"My chance?"

"To save me."

"Courtney—then you remembered?"

"I had never forgotten."

"Never!" Fenton half stumbled to his feet. Then weakness overcame him, and he fell back. "You knew all the time who I was, what I had done?"

"Yes."

"Did you know—that night when I came to you—that I meant to poison you?"

"I guessed."

"Did you know that I meant the operation to fail?"

"I thought it possible."

"Courtney—you risked your life. Why?"

"Because I had confidence in you—I trusted you. I gave you the chance to save yourself from the remorse that in the end must have killed you. You were my friend. I wanted to win you back." Fenton burst into a laugh that was like a sob.

"Your friend! I left you in the desert. I saved my own skin, like a coward."

"That was the dark hour of your life. But it is blotted out. You have won your own salvation."

"Courtney—you forgive?"

"I have forgotten, and I shall never remember."

They clasped hands.

Fenton lifted his half-blinded eyes to the clear sky. The curse was lifted.

Above him the evening star rose peaceful and resplendent, and in her light he recognised the symbol of a stainless future.

FATE'S FOOL

I

THE fire had died down. Only a few glowing embers remained, and these Travers kicked impatiently together with the heel of his boot.

"I was dreaming, I suppose," he explained to the man beside him, who was divesting himself of his dripping riding-coat. "A most unprofessional thing for a Department of Public Works man to do, eh? And on such a night!"

Both stood silent an instant listening to the hurricane of wind and rain as it whirled itself in frenzied rage against the frail walls of the shanty. Occasionally there was a lull, and in that breathing space they heard the roar of swollen waters hurrying on their wild course.

"Mother Ganges is angry," Newton observed, with his blue hands to the rekindling fire. "There'll be damage done during the next twenty-four hours."

"Not here, though," Travers returned. "Everything is snug and tight. Cunningham knows what he is about. He took care that there shouldn't be a bolt or a screw loose in the old bridge before he left her. Now I am in charge. I can sit on the

bank and kick my heels and see how well he has done the thing—confound him!"

"You could have done it as well if you had been given the chance," the younger man said in a tone of consolation.

Travers flung himself back in his chair, his arms crossed over his massive chest, his weather-beaten features expressive of a whimsical bitterness.

"If I had been given the chance," he echoed. "My dear boy, I have a sort of feeling that the sentence will be written on my grave. Future generations will say, 'Here lieth the man who had possibilities and abilities, only nobody ever bothered to exploit them——'"

"And who never bothered to exploit them himself," Newton put in. The other shrugged his shoulders.

"A man can't fight against his fate," he said.

Newton, who had been busy piling logs on the crackling fire, gave an exclamation of impatience.

"There isn't such a thing as Fate," he retorted, with a young, enthusiastic conviction. "Fate is just yourself. Events stream up to you—little events, big events, serious, comic, and what they are to you, what part they play in your life, just depends on how you grapple with them. That's my point of view. I tell you, things haven't always shone for me—they're not exactly shining now. *You* grumble because you have been given nothing to do but play foster-mother to Cunningham's old bridge and see her safe through the floods. What about *me*? I'm under you. I've just got to turn to the left

and turn to the right according to orders and think as little as possible. Think of it—me, with my second place on the exam. list! Sickening, eh? Never mind; wait till a likely event rolls in my way, and I'll catch it and dig my teeth and nails into it and batter and pound it until it takes the shape I want it to, and gives me my lift in the world. It may be on its way already. Anyhow it *will* come, because it comes to everyone sooner or later."

Travers shook his head. "Not everyone," he said.

"Yes, everyone; only not everyone understands how to treat it when it comes."

Travers leant forward with his hand resting on his companion's knee.

"You're younger than I am, Newton," he said. "You have only your own experiences to judge by, and perhaps have never met a man like myself who has been steadily, persistently pursued by an adverse Fate."

"I have met many men who have steadily and persistently bungled their best chances," was the warm answer.

"Yes, so have I—weak-kneed, weak-willed men. But look at me, Newton. Am I that sort?" Newton looked at him critically, noting the keen grey eyes, square chin, firm mouth.

"No," he said; "you're not."

"All the same I'm forty and a failure."

"Perhaps your chance is to come."

Newton was silent for a while.

"What you want is the spur," he said at last.

"When you've got that you'll be out of the paddock in no time. A man who works for himself alone has no incentive, and that's what you lack."

"Not now."

Newton glanced at him with interrogative eyebrows.

"Not now?" he echoed.

"Not for two years." It was the elder man's turn to look into the fire. A smile of dreamy reminiscence played round his pleasant mouth. Newton gave his chair a hitch which brought him closer to his companion.

"Travers," he said, "we're old friends, and there isn't much we have not shared together, good and bad. Tell me all about it, will you?"

"It's a woman," Travers began. Newton nodded.

"I knew," he said. "A woman is always the spur in a man's side, and it just depends on how she pricks him as to whether he takes a fence well or blunders and does for himself. What's her name?"

"Her name doesn't matter," Travers returned. "I have no right to mention it in connection with myself. It was down in the Madras Presidency two years ago. I had six months' leave on my hands at the time, and no people at home to take me back there. Consequently I just muddled about where I was. I'm not much of a social animal at my best, but I suppose I got a sort of rabid hunger for my own species. Anyhow, I haunted clubs and ballrooms and garden parties, seeking I didn't know what—at least not then. Afterwards I knew. It was at some

dance or other that I met her. I can't dance—not more than a bear—so we sat it out and talked together.”

He paused as though suddenly immersed in recollections. Under his breath he hummed broken snatches of a waltz, not entirely in tune. “Women have a way with them, Newton,” he observed. Newton nodded at the fire.

“Some of them have,” he assented.

“In a few minutes, as it seemed to me, I was pouring out to her things I had never told anyone before—things I'd scarcely ever thought of, ideas, hopes, ambitions, what not. When it was all over, and she had gone, I began to see that I had been a lonely, miserable man, with a heart full of bitterness. It was a glorious Indian night—you know what that's like, Newton—and the band played. Don't laugh at me. I may have been mawkish, but it was more than mawkishness. In that night I changed. I began to care what became of myself. I began to be sorry that I hadn't done better, to be sorry, too, that I had been such a slack, good-for-nothing beggar. The feeling grew day by day with every time I saw her. She was sweet and good and true, the sort of woman who creates an atmosphere of purity about her wherever she goes, and makes the worst blackguard innocent in her presence. I felt happier and better than I had ever done in my whole life; but when I saw that she too cared I——”

“You went in and won?” interposed Newton carelessly.

"No, I went away."

The younger man sighed.

"I wash my hands of you," he said. "You're just the sort of man to make the kindest Fate turn crusty."

"You won't say that when you have thought a moment," Travers went on. "One thing, at least, she had taught me, and that was to do the decent thing. I was poor, getting on in life, with nothing on this earth worth offering a woman. I hadn't the right to bind her to me. So I cleared out. All the same"—he doubled his fists hard—"if my chance ever does come, and you say it comes to everyone sooner or later, I shall take it and hold fast, and if she cared, as I think she did, I shall go back to her and find she has waited."

"You're a fool," said Newton, getting up.

"You say that because you don't understand," Travers answered.

For a moment nothing more was said. Newton's face had grown intensely grave. Evidently he was approaching the region of his own affairs.

"At any rate there is one thing I understand," he said, putting his hand on the bowed shoulder, "and that's the caring part of the business, old fellow. It has come into my life, too, and has changed me as you say it has changed you, from a careless drifting into a man with a big purpose and a big will. Only I am different from you—not such a decent sort, and with none of the Quixotic element about me. I told her just what I felt, and what a hopeless, luckless rotter I was, and asked if she

thought I was worth having. It never occurred to me to wait."

"And now I am to congratulate you, I suppose?"

Newton shook his head.

"We are not so far as that," he said. "She asked me to wait. Between you and me, Travers, I think she wanted to give me the spur and make me show my mettle before I won her. And that's what I mean to do—what I must do, for I'm as poor as a mouse."

"You young optimist!" Travers exclaimed. "Yet I don't blame you. I'm glad you're like that. You've put some of your enthusiastic faith into me and made me hope—heaven knows what." He rubbed his hands together with a sudden, eager impatience.

"Do you want to see her photo?" asked Newton, coming to a sudden standstill at Travers' back. "I have it with me." He went red as he spoke. Travers nodded absently.

"I should like to," he said in the tone of a man whose thoughts are elsewhere. Newton fumbled at his breast pocket, and drawing out a battered piece of cardboard, put it in Travers' hand.

"There!" he said triumphantly. "It's a bad likeness, but it gives you an idea. Just imagine the hair curly and golden shaded with red, the clearest grey eyes that ever looked you full in the face, straight, dark eyebrows, and a mouth that—— Well, isn't it a splendid face?" he said. "Even there can't you see how splendid it is?"

Travers seemed not to have heard him. The red reflection from the warm blaze could not change his

absolute pallor. Two points of restless firelight in his eyes gave him an expression curiously desperate and haggard.

"Yes, a splendid face!" he exclaimed, suddenly springing up and thrusting the picture back into Newton's astonished hands. "Splendid! splendid!" He laughed and slapped his companion on the shoulder. "You're one of Fate's darlings," he said. "You can afford to defy her; you——"

He broke off, holding up his hand. "What's that?" he asked in a lowered voice. "Didn't you hear something? A bell——?"

Newton shook his head.

"It's the water," he said. "It's rising fast, and some chains have broken loose. I heard the clanking myself." The wind sank an instant, and both men heard the sharp, imperative whir of an electric bell.

"Someone is on the wires, trying to send a message," Travers said. "Go and see to it, will you? If I am wanted call me."

Newton nodded and went into the next room, closing the door after him. In his haste he had let the photo fall. Travers picked it up and laid it quietly on the table. Leaning on both his hands, he studied the delicate though saddened features, his own set and hard, his mouth closed in a curved line of cynicism and bitterness. The minutes passed and Newton did not return. With a movement of impatience either at his own reflections or the other's absence, Travers pushed the picture on one side and went towards the next room.

"What's up?" he called, half opening the door. "Anything wrong?"

Newton glanced up from the instrument he was working, his face in the flickering candle light perplexed and doubtful.

"Coming in a minute," he said curtly. "I am taking down the maddest message ever sent by man. It's from Carruthers, down at Z——, and he's talking rabid nonsense. Either he's drunk or——"

The last word died into an inaudible murmur. Travers went back to the fire and stood with folded arms watching the red firelight. He was aroused by a touch on the arm.

"There you are!" Newton exclaimed. "See if you can make head or tail of it. I can't. But something is pretty wrong, that's evident." Travers took the scrap of paper, and holding it negligently to the light began to read aloud—

"God's sake—help. Natives attacked—bad—wounded. Bridge—flood. Only five—if no help—bridge lost—think dying—can do nothing. Come—once—Carruth——"

"What's it all mean?" Newton asked. Travers' hand with the paper sank slowly to his side. He was smiling a twisted, curious smile.

"Carruthers is engaged repairing a bridge forty miles lower down the river," he said. "He had only native workmen, and as he is intensely hated there was sure to be trouble. I suppose they've tried to murder him, and have gone off and left him with five loyal incapables to pull himself and the shaky

old bridge out of the mess as best possible. By Jove!" he lifted his head as though listening. "How the river rises. Won't the D.P.W. rampage when another few million rupees go down stream; and wouldn't they fondle and pamper any enterprising chap who saved them——"

Newton shook him by the arm.

"You've hit it!" he cried in feverish excitement. "You've hit it! The man who keeps Carruthers' bridge above water is made—made for life. It's your chance, Travers, you lucky dog. I'll wire Carruthers, if he's alive, that you are coming as fast as a horse can carry you. Forty miles! Your horse is as fresh as paint. You can be there before daybreak and set to work at once. Wake up, man! Don't you see what it means?"

Travers looked at him, and then beyond him to the table and the forgotten picture.

"What it means?" he said slowly. "Bah! Not much. Anyhow it's not in my line. Forty miles on horseback in this storm to save a rotten old bridge I never built? Thank you. I'm too old. If it gives you any pleasure, go by all means. I can spare you." Newton took a step back.

"You won't go?" he demanded, and every word was marked by a bewildered emphasis. "You mean you are going to chuck up a chance for which another man would give his right hand, just because of a handful of wind and rain! I don't believe it!"

"Don't believe it, then," Travers said, stretching himself and yawning. "It's a fact all the same."

Newton studied him with a dawning fear in his eyes.

"Look here," he said with an effort to disguise an uneasy emotion, "are you trying to do me a good turn, Travers? If you are I am jolly grateful, but it won't do. After all, you haven't only got yourself to think of. There's the woman in the Madras Presidency, you know. You can't expect her to wait for ever whilst you do your friends good turns. You must think of her."

"I do," said Travers, with his eyes on the fire, "always."

"Then go, like a good fellow!"

"No. But don't give me credit for any noble motives on your account. I'm not stopping for your sake."

Newton drew himself up. There was a faint contempt in his attitude and in his expression.

"Then I have your permission?"

"By all means. My horse is at your disposal. I shall remain in charge. Let me know how you get on. If you want help I will do all I can to hurry up the authorities, but the more you do off your own bat the better for you. Good luck!"

Newton pulled on his still dripping riding-coat, and then going to the table picked up the photo and stowed it carefully away in his breast pocket. From the doorway he looked back at the tall figure of his senior.

"I'm your friend, Travers," he said, "and I'm bothered if I know whether my friendship ought

to make me hold my tongue or speak out. But I'd rather speak out. I tell you what it is—you haven't any right to throw stones at Fate. She has done her best for you—has given you the chance of a lifetime—and you have messed it—funked it. As for the woman for whom you were going to do all these wonders—she has my sympathy. If she is anything like the description you gave, I don't think you are worthy of her."

"Aren't you rather wasting time?" Travers asked calmly.

Newton went out into the storm, and a gust of wind slammed the door violently after him.

II

Travers spent the better part of the next few days in taking down the breathless messages which came at intervals along the wires from Z—. There was something in the curt, disjointed sentences that invigorated like the breath of a north wind. They told the tale of a simple, unpretending man who was fighting overwhelming difficulties single handed, but with tireless courage.

"Carruthers just died in my arms," ran one of the earlier messages. "Six natives have come back. Wanted to murder me. I drove them to the work at end of revolver. It's a race against the flood. By to-night one of us throws up the sponge. It's not going to be me."

In the afternoon came a jerkier communication. "Native stabbed me in right arm. Won't do it again.

Bridge almost safe. Another three hours. No rest, but going strong."

Towards evening Travers spelt out the last triumphant message. "Bridge safe." Have wired headquarters."

Travers threw himself back and ground his teeth. All night he sat opposite the instrument waiting for further news, but none came. His spurred imagination saw how the exhausted man flung himself down and slept the sleep of success, and his own unused energies quivered under the strain of inactivity. In the morning he went down to the bank of the swollen river and paced backwards and forwards, counting his forty empty years. He had looked forward to each, believing that one or other would bring the Chance hitherto denied him. But it never came. He looked at the bridge, an ugly, graceless structure stretching from bank to bank, yet noble in his sight because he knew how each bolt and bar had been fixed and at what cost. How he had prayed that it might be granted him to do just so much! Instead, he had been set like a human sheep dog to watch over the work of another. Was that anyhow his appointed part in life? He had loved a woman. His friend had taken her from him. At the critical moment in his own life, when for the first time Fortune had smiled faintly, it had been ordained that he should turn his back upon her in order that he might procure the happiness of the one being he had loved and lost. Was that also failure?

He turned wearily back to his rough dwelling.

The wind blew a furious war dance about him, driving great drops of rain and spray into his heedless face. No, not failure, surely not. Fate had given him perhaps the greatest chance of all—the chance to sacrifice himself.

Towards evening he received a brief, happy message from Newton.

"Headquarters have congratulated. Three months' sick leave and promise of big things ahead. Substitute arrives to-morrow. Good-bye." Travers bowed his face in his hands. He knew with whom that sick leave would be spent, and prayed for strength.

After that life resumed for him its old monotonous course. Little tasks were confided to his care, little tasks that he accepted uncomplainingly and accomplished with conscientious care. After four months he was put in charge of a department in South India, and it was there that for the first time since that eventful evening he met Harry Newton. They shook hands with a faint, almost unnoticeable constraint.

"I heard you were here," Newton explained, "so I thought I'd drop in and see how you were getting on."

"Pretty well," Travers answered, playing with the papers on the table before him. "I meant to write to you, but I have been busy. You have been ill after your famous feat?"

He spoke with a forced light-heartedness, the question that trembled on his lips held well back. Newton glanced at his arm.

"A mere nothing," he said. "A scratch with blood-poisoning results—that was all." Quite sud-

denly he threw over his enforced calm, his natural impulsive self bubbling over the walls of all restraint. "By Jove! Travers," he exclaimed with a deep breath, "I'm the happiest man on earth, though I suppose it's commonplace to say so!"

Travers smiled. His unuttered question was already answered.

"So it's all settled?" he said gently. "She has given her consent at last?"

Newton nodded.

"I couldn't wait those wretched six months," he said, "especially after everything had gone so well with me. And I think that she was glad too that the time of waiting was over and that I had won her so soon." He leant forward, and his face grew suddenly grave. "Not that it was my success she was waiting for, Travers. Women aren't like that, it seems. She laughed at the idea. It was something else—another man."

He stopped, frowning as though at some vague trouble. Travers' hands tightened over the arms of his chair.

"Another man?" he uttered huskily.

"Yes; another man. It seems she met him some time ago and—well, fell in love with him. He went away without speaking, like the silly fool he must have been, and never wrote and never came back. All the same, as she told me since, she couldn't shake him off, couldn't put him out of her life, as it were. Even when I came, and she began to care for me, she dared not say so or give her promise.

She felt that if he ever came back and beckoned her to go to him she would have to go, and her love for him would transcend every other love.

"That night when Carruthers' telegram came for help she made up her mind to write to me and tell me that, it was no good, and that she could never marry me. Then three days later, when she got my good news, something snapped—so she described it. She felt that the past had been all a dream, and that it would never come back. She put it away from her, knowing that it meant the wreck of our happiness. The last time I saw her——" He smiled, and the smile lit up his whole face.

"It was all right?" Travers suggested dully.

"Yes; it was all right. She had put him out of her life." He paused. "I suppose it doesn't matter, my telling you," he said dubiously. "You see, we're as happy as we can be—it all belongs to the past."

"Of course—it all belongs to the past," Travers repeated. He seemed to have lost the power of independent thought and to have become a mere echo. And his pallor was like that of the night of his lost Chance, only more deathly. There was no light—not even of despair—in his laden eyes. Newton got up.

"I shall expect to hear good news of *you* soon," he said with gay significance; "but before anything of that sort happens you have got to assist me into my new state. We are to be married next month, and of course you as my best friend——"

Travers shook his head.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm—going home on leave."

Newton's face fell, but for a moment he said nothing, and began to trace out the pattern on the carpet with his riding whip.

"I say, Travers," he began at last. "I feel rather uneasy about—about you, you know. There was something about that evening which I don't understand, and never shall. Are you sure you have never once regretted giving me your chance?"

"Since everything is for the best in this world, what should I regret?" Travers answered. "Fate chooses out the best man, Newton, and if she plays facetious pranks on the second-best, who can blame her? If the victim is wise he joins in the laugh at his own expense and makes the best of it."

"I don't understand," Newton objected.

"I didn't suppose you would. There! Good-bye!" They shook hands. "By the way," Travers added, "don't mention to your future wife any imaginary indebtedness you may feel towards me. What I did I did for my own reasons, but she may not like it."

"All right. If you think it best, I won't. Good-bye." They parted as men do who feel instinctively that somewhere, somehow, a link which united them has snapped.

Travers closed the door on him and went back to his table. In a side drawer there was hidden a cheap little photo of a woman, which he took out and studied before he tore it carefully into a dozen pieces.

THE BROKEN FETISH

I

THE little group of officers standing against the wall formed a bright spot of colour in the steady stream that ebbed and flowed through his Excellency's brilliantly lighted *salon*. They were men of various ages and ranks, the eldest, a tall, grey-headed veteran, bearing the epaulettes of a colonel, the youngest those of a lieutenant. Nevertheless, there was a certain marked intimacy between them which proclaimed an unusual bond of comradeship. That the resplendent Hussar uniform represented the bond in question was obvious enough; but only those profoundly initiated in all things military knew to what extent it was the outward and visible sign of an exclusiveness which had become a byword, even in case-hardened Berlin. In truth, the Emperor's Hussars were famous for many things—for hard-fought battles, desperate charges, and wild exploits, but, above all, for their unimpeachable noble lineage and an *esprit de corps* which could at times amount to arrogance. Thus his Excellency's guests passed them by with respect, and only the constant clapping together of the spurred

heels and the return bow indicated that they knew and were known by the whole social world.

Presently the subdued hum of conversation died away as though at some given signal. Those who had been wandering backwards and forwards between the various groups stood still and turned their faces expectantly towards the further end of the room, where a temporary platform had been raised amidst an extravagant profusion of flowers. The general attitude of attention spread to the five officers who unconsciously tiptoed so as to have a better view over the heads of the crowd.

"It is the prima donna's turn," Oberst von Polach observed. "Only one song, of course, but I fancy even that much has cost our respected host a pretty penny. A voice like that can command any price so long as it lasts." He was interrupted by a clapping of hands, in which he himself joined. "A fine figure of a woman," he added to his adjutant as the brief applause died away into an attentive silence. The adjutant nodded, but made no answer. His clever, clean-shaven face had grown serious; there was a sharp line about the mouth and a sudden glitter in the keen eyes which betokened an interest almost out of proportion to the event. Yet the woman standing in the centre of the platform merited interest. She was beautiful with that unusual beauty which is classical, but neither dull nor insipid. There was intelligence written on the broad forehead beneath the crown of dark hair, and every feature in its perfection added to the general look of strength and quiet purpose. Her

complexion was almost colourless, but its pallor seemed only to throw up in stronger relief the deep-set, somewhat sad eyes which passed over the heads of her audience as though in search of a familiar face. Only when she sang—it was Schumann's "Soldatenbraut"—she smiled, and then her beauty became a living power which had no need of her voice to reach the hearts of those who listened to her in enraptured silence. When the song came to an end the colonel applauded with a sudden relaxation of his aristocratic reserve.

"There is not another voice like that in Europe," he said. "What do you think, Braunfels?"

His adjutant did not seem to hear him. He had not clapped with the rest. His hands were clenched on the hilt of his sword, his tall, sinewy figure was drawn erect, as though under the stress of some powerfully repressed feeling. A young officer who was negligently leaning against the wall folded his arms and laughed.

"There is not such another woman," he said. "Half Paris went mad over her—partly out of admiration, partly out of curiosity, and I don't know what else besides."

Wolf von Braunfels shifted his position slightly, but gave no other sign of having heard, and it was the colonel who took up the thread of conversation.

"A scandal?" he suggested.

The other shrugged his shoulders, his eyes fixed on the adjutant's set face with an expression which might well have been translated into malicious amusement.

"Oh! I don't know," he said. "Nobody could find out anything about her. Her past was wrapped in shadow—pretty inky shadow too, I fancy."

The young adjutant swung round as though he had been struck. His face was scarlet; there was something threatening in his grip upon his sword-hilt.

"I beg of you to have a care, Herr Graf!" he said sternly. "The lady of whom you speak is to be my wife."

Had a thunderbolt fallen in the midst of them the little party could not have shown more consternation. It was only momentary. Then the knowledge that they were the cynosure of a dozen curious eyes, and the long acquired habit of self-restraint, forced each man to assume an appearance of indifference. Only Count Henning's livid face and the contracted brows of his adversary testified to the brewing storm. Oberst von Polach took his adjutant firmly by the elbow.

"Come!" he commanded. "I want to speak with you a moment."

Wolf von Braunfels followed his senior into an empty alcove. He was still trembling, and there was a dangerous restlessness of the hand upon the sword-hilt which boded ill. The colonel took out his cigar case and proffered it to the younger man.

"Smoke!" he said sharply. "Pretend there is nothing the matter. There must be no scandal. Now tell me—is it true?"

"That Fräulein Ameron is to be my wife? Yes, it is true," was the defiant answer.

"You would have done better to have told me of this before."

"It was impossible, Herr Oberst. I only knew myself for certain to-day."

Oberst von Polach stood silent a moment, surveying his adjutant with eyes that were half kindly, half severe.

"It is an inopportune moment," he began at last, "but it is better for me to warn you at once. My dear Braunfels, you know you are not quite free in this matter—*noblesse oblige*. You belong to the regiment; you are a vital part of the whole, and therefore we have the right to interfere where the general honour of the regiment is concerned. You must be aware that I should never forward an appeal for the Emperor's consent to your or any other officer's marriage with a professional singer. The regiment would not accept her—it is part of the unwritten law to which we all conform, and to which there is no exception."

"And if she gave up her profession?"

The colonel raised his eyebrows doubtfully.

"That is another matter," he said. "If she would make that sacrifice, and if her reputation——"

"I give you my word of honour——"

"My dear Braunfels, will you tell me what you know of Fräulein Ameron?" The quiet, incisive interruption acted as it was intended it should act. The young officer stood silent. Gradually the colour died out of his face, leaving him intensely pale. "We are not unreasonable," the colonel went on after a

moment. "Honest blood is honest blood, whether it be noble or not. We only ask that an officer shall not bring into our circle a wife whose career plays itself on a public platform, or whose name——"

"Herr Oberst!" Wolf broke in passionately.

"Very well," the colonel continued, unperturbed. "You say that Fräulein Ameron will give up her career for your sake. You are certain that an alliance with her will cast no possible slur upon either your family or the regiment. Prove this, and I am satisfied. On the other hand, in the name of the regiment, I must ask you for your promise."

"My promise?"

"To do nothing rash, but to submit yourself to my decision."

"And that decision?"

"Will depend on the circumstances I have mentioned."

Braunfels hesitated. He felt that the older man had driven him into a trap from which there was no escape.

"Why do you hesitate?" the colonel asked. "Surely you have no doubts as to your assertions?"

"None!" was the bold answer. "You have my word of honour."

"Thank you. That is all I wish."

Wolf von Braunfels saluted stiffly, and, turning, lost himself in the crowd. He knew that the trap was closed, and that he was caught. He could only console himself with the reflection that there was no reason why he should have refused his promise, and

that to have done so would have cast a slur upon his faith in the woman he was to make his wife. Nevertheless, he felt disturbed and uneasy, and obeying an imperative impulse he hurried to the main staircase. There, in spite of the thick wrappings and the shifting crowd of guests, his quick eye instantly picked out the figure for which he was seeking.

"Erna!" he exclaimed.

She turned her dark, serious face to his and smiled. It was the same smile that before had seemed a beautiful accompaniment to her song. Like a light from behind a transparent mask it lit up every feature with a gentle tender happiness.

"Dear Wolf!" she said. She took his proffered arm and continued on her way down the broad stairs. "I was just going to slip out unnoticed," she went on. "People make such a ridiculous fuss over me. But I had a sort of feeling I should see you. I am so glad. Were you there when I sang?"

"Yes," he jerked out. "It was magnificent—splendid." His heart was beating with a curious rapidity. He had longed to see her, and now he was afraid. It was in vain that his whole soul rose in revolt against the bonds of his caste, against the pitiless laws of the society to which he belonged. His love, though it was the strongest passion of his life, beat itself impotently against the walls which generations of his race had built between him and its object. A sacrifice had to be made, and hardest of all was the knowledge that she must be the one to make it. She seemed to notice nothing of his distress.

There was a confident happiness in her bearing which made him half ashamed of the things he revered, his calling and his name.

"I am glad you were pleased," she said. "I sang to you, though I could not see you. Did you notice what song it was? There are two lines which I like :—

'For his king he shed his blood—
But he would do as much for me.'

It pleases me to imagine that as surely as you would die for your King you would die for me. Is that presumptuous?"

He shook his head.

"No, no. Heaven knows I would give my life for you, only——" He felt himself seized by a painful doubt and stopped short. It was true. He would give his life for her, but there are gifts in a man's power greater than life; and Duty, changed into an ugly monster, stood before him with the command, "Thou shalt not." He pressed the arm lying on his so that he must have hurt her. "I would give my life," he repeated desperately. "And you, Erna, what would you do for my sake?"

They had reached the bottom of the staircase. Indifferent to the curiosity of those who passed, she turned and looked him straight in the face.

"Anything," she said.

"Anything? Erna, would you give up all this wealth—this triumph, and all that it means? Would you give up your profession for my sake?"

"My profession!" she echoed blankly.

He hesitated, and then plunged with the recklessness of despair.

"I mean—I spoke to the colonel about our marriage. It seems that if you marry me you *must* give it up. Oh, my dear, you will never understand the stupid narrow-hearted folly of it all, and I can never explain——"

They had reached the waiting carriage. By the flickering street lamp he saw that her pallor had become intensified. Her dark eyes were wide open and fixed on his face with a dawning pain which chilled him to the heart.

"You do not need to explain," she said dully. "I understand—I ought to have understood from the beginning, only I was too happy to think. I—I do not belong to your set, Wolf; they would never have me."

"Erna!" he exclaimed.

"And then," she went on, in the same toneless voice, "they will want to know all about me—my name, my past, my family. Oh, Wolf!" She sank back in the carriage seat. The hand that lay in his had become cold and powerless. "Let me go now!" she whispered. "You must let me go my own way for a day or two; I must think—I cannot answer you now."

"But surely, Erna," he stammered, "if you made the one sacrifice—oh, my dear, I would try to make it good to you with my whole life—surely if you would do that the rest would be all right?"

She shook her head.

"God help us both!" she said. "It would not be all right—it will never be all right."

The impatient horses plunged forward. Like a man who has been struck down by a nameless calamity, Wolf stood back and watched the carriage lights flash into the confusion of traffic and disappear. When he at last turned to go he found the Graf Henning at his elbow, a malicious smile on the pale, aristocratic face.

II

The Regimental Liebesmahl had lasted well into the evening. The usual toasts had been given and answered, and the atmosphere hung heavy with smoke and the smell of wine.

Wolf von Braunfels sat at his place, his eyes fixed studiously on the table in front of him. He was thinking of Erna. The memory of the previous night, with its dark suggestion of misfortune, weighed upon him like a nightmare, and he had besides an odd prescience of danger which perhaps had its source in the face opposite his own. The whole evening Graf Henning had drunk heavily, and though he had not spoken to Wolf there was a covert insult in his glance and in the short apparently uncalled-for bursts of laughter which seemed to threaten and to challenge. As the hours advanced, the hostility of his manner grew more obvious. The officers on either side threw significant glances at each other and at Wolf, who, fully alive now to the storm-laden atmosphere, at last rose to go. It seemed that his

movement had urged the Graf to a sudden decision. He leant over the table, his flushed and heated features lighted by a grinning satisfaction.

"Excuse me, mein liebe," he said, "but might I ask if your unexpected announcement last night is based on fact?"

Wolf drew himself up stiffly.

"It is not a subject on which a man of honour is likely to jest," he said.

"In that case I have something for you." He fumbled at his coat, and, drawing out a bundle of letters, threw them on the table. "They may prove of some interest," he added.

Wolf took up the bundle.

"What are these?" he said sharply.

"Love letters, my dear Braunfels."

"From whom?"

"From Fräulein Ameron—to myself."

An absolute frozen silence had fallen on the long table. The two men, facing each other, had suddenly become the central figures in a drama whose end was growing every moment more inevitable. White to the lips, Wolf replaced the packet.

"I do not believe you," he said quietly and distinctly.

Graf Henning laughed, seeming to pass the insult over unnoticed.

"Perhaps an extract might convince you," he said. He loosened the string and took out a letter. "This, for instance, is dated only a few days back. The superscription is most tender: 'My well-loved Hubert——'"

"You lie!"

Again Henning laughed.

"Look for yourself. Do you know that writing?"

Against his will Wolf's eyes flashed over the extended letter. With a deadening shock he recognised the boldly scrawled signature, but for the instant the recognition roused in him only the one fierce desire—to silence the jeering tongue, to strike out the ugly sneer on the lips of the man opposite him. He leant forward, and his restrained voice cut like a pistol shot through the tense silence.

"Graf Henning, you are a blackguard!"

Henning stumbled to his feet. He had heard an irrepressible murmur of sympathy, and the sound turned his mocking pleasure to rage. He picked up his half-emptied glass and flung its contents in Wolf's face.

"That is my answer!" he burst out.

Wolf wiped the wine from his uniform. His manner had become studiously calm. Only his hand trembled, and his face was grey with the effort at self-control. Ignoring his adversary, he turned to a captain seated beside him.

"Berndorf, will you do me the favour to arrange this matter?"

The elder officer rose and bowed gravely.

"It will give me pleasure to render you a service," he said.

Without another word Wolf saluted the silent company and quitted the room and the Casino. The night air blew pleasantly cool against his burning

face, but it brought no relief to the torment of his mind. Now that he had silenced Henning's tongue, he had still to face the force of the greater calamity. He *had* recognised the writing. He could neither deny nor forget the fact. It only remained for him to ask, What did it mean? If for one moment an ugly thought flashed through his brain, he dismissed it instantly. Erna's face, with its pale grave beauty, rose like a reproachful phantom before his vision and accused him of an unwarrantable distrust, and all the chivalry and love of which he was capable rose in her defence. Yet he knew, too, that there must be some explanation, and that he must have it at once—before the final act of the drama which for him at least might mean the end.

As he entered his lodgings he found the lights still burning. His landlady, heavy-eyed and palpably disturbed, met him in the hall.

"Herr Baron!" she exclaimed. "Ach! how glad I am that you have come! Two ladies are waiting for you in your study. They have been there all the evening. They say they must speak to you."

Wolf nodded, and entered his room, closing the door quickly after him. It was no surprise to him when he saw Erna rise and come forward to greet him. It seemed to him that she had come in answer to the imperative call of his need of her; that through some occult power of sympathy she had felt the weight bearing down upon him, and had come to lift it by one word of assurance, of explanation. Yet, as her hand touched his, his sense of relief and thankful-

ness passed as swiftly as it had come. The hands trembled, the dark eyes shone with a brilliancy akin to fever.

"Oh, Wolf," she cried, "I ~~am~~ so glad! Oh! I have been frightened—you will never know." With what seemed an effort to regain her calm she turned to the middle-aged lady who accompanied her. "Dear Martha," she begged, "I must speak to Wolf alone—only a minute."

The elder lady bowed gravely to Wolf and passed out of the door which he held open for her. In passing she glanced at him, and something in the old, careworn face arrested his attention. Had she meant to warn him? What had her expression signified? He had no time to consider. He turned, and once more took Erna's hands in his.

"Why have you come?" he asked eagerly. "What has happened?"

She drew back, her eyes seeking his as though they would have probed them to the uttermost depths.

"Oh, I have been so frightened!" she repeated brokenly. "These hours of waiting! Wolf, tell me, swear to me that nothing has happened. You have not quarrelled?" His start of amazement betrayed him. She looked closer. She saw the wine-stains on his uniform; something in his white, set face must have been answer enough. A low exclamation of distress broke from her lips. "Then I have come too late! Oh, Wolf, I have come too late!"

He said nothing. He made no attempt to approach her now. He did not try to think how she had come

by her knowledge, nor by what chain of circumstance she had had a forewarning of the scene in the Casino. He simply stood quietly waiting for her to speak, to give the explanation which in some vague way he knew had become unavailing."

"You have quarrelled," she said, "and that can only mean one thing. Is it not so?" He still made no answer, but his silence gave consent, and she went on in the same low voice: "Wolf, forgive him! He was mad and beside himself. For my sake, don't let it go any further. I beg of you, draw back at whatever cost!"

"For whose sake—his or mine?"

She started back as though he had struck her, and it was a long minute before the answer came from her dry and shaking lips.

"For—his."

Wolf turned away, hiding instinctively how deep the wound was which she inflicted. This, then, was the explanation he had sought. She had made him the victim of an unworthy game for the sake of an unworthy scoundrel who had not hesitated to drag her good name through the mud of scandal.

"You love him, Erna?" he said at last.

She nodded. A curious ironical smile played about her lips.

"Yes, I love him."

"And yet you would have married me?"

Had he been less absorbed he would have seen that she was suffering intensely, but he only heard her voice, which rang quiet and steady, almost monotonous.

"No, Wolf; that was my madness. I did not understand what it all meant. I came here—to tell you that I could not be your wife. I had forgotten Hubert, and besides—I can't make the sacrifice you ask of me. It's too big for me. You see what a poor, petty creature I am—not in the least worthy of you. I must have my triumphs—the adulation—above all, the money."

He smothered the exclamation of mingled pain and relief which forced itself to his lips. At any rate, she had not meant to deceive him to the end. So much was saved from the ruin of his illusions.

"I am glad," he said thickly, "glad you were honest with me. Erna"—he stood upright and faced her with hard-won calm—"Erna, I am not a clever man. I don't understand what you have done, and I don't ask you to explain. The thing is there—it can never be altered. Only it would have been better had you told me before Henning and I——"

"I know," she interrupted dully. "I came too late."

"Not too late. Erna, it doesn't matter about me; I daresay a man gets over things. But you are a woman, and a woman is different. I don't want to hurt anyone you care for—I care too much. I promise you I will make any sacrifice to prevent that."

• He pretended to be busy with some papers on his table. In his own wretchedness he did not see hers. He heard her cross the room, he heard her sob huskily, but he had not the strength to face her.

"Oh, Wolf, don't stand like that! It will break my heart!"

He tried to laugh.

"It needn't. I'm all right. Don't worry. Only—go away now. You have my promise. Henning is safe."

He heard the door close, footsteps descending the stairs, the rumble of a cab driving along the streets. He went on sorting his papers. He worked carefully and methodically, yet he neither saw nor knew what he was doing. Something in him, the centre of his vitality, seemed to have been struck numb and powerless. He had lost her, and with her all capacity for feeling. He had become a mere machine obeying the behests of an indomitable will.

As the dawn broke there was a ring at the outer bell, and a few minutes after Captain von Berndorf entered and shook him cordially by the hand.

"It's all settled," he said. "The Court of Honour sat last night. The meeting is for to-morrow morning at five-thirty sharp by the river. Pistols at eleven paces. You will continue firing until one of you is *hors ae combat*. The first shot is yours."

Wolf started to his feet.

"Mine!" he exclaimed.

"Yes; the Court decided that Graf Henning was the challenging party. It is a good thing for you, as he is first-class with the pistol—keeps you out of reach of any bad luck. Of course, you will bring him down at the first exchange."

Wolf turned his head away.

"Of course," he said.

III

The dawn broke cold and grey. Mists rose from the river and encircled the silent little party which stood and waited in the clearing. As the sun rose higher a faint damp breeze began to blow from the west, and the mists fled like ghosts that had been surprised by the sudden daylight.

Captain von Berndorf surveyed the dreary scene with an expression of satisfaction.

"We could not have had a better morning," he said.

Wolf was quite calm, quite sure of himself. Generations of brave men who had fought out this same battle with steadfast dignity stood at his elbow with their mighty encouragement. "You bear our name. You will behave like a soldier and a gentleman." In that crucial moment it was his name, his honour—the fetishes against which he had railed in his angry bitterness—which gave him strength and kept his heart beating with a high pride. He remembered his father's saying, "A Braunfels never flinches, and a Braunfels never breaks his word," and it gave him satisfaction to think that the saying had been true, and would be true even to him, the last of his old and noble race.

•He heard the seconds talking together. Once Henning spoke and the sound of his voice brought Erna back to his memory. He thought of her with a tenderness deepened by the shadow which was slowly creeping across his life's full daylight. He forgot that she had wronged and betrayed him. The one thing

he remembered was that for him she had been and was still the only woman in the world.

"Everything is ready, Braunfels," the captain said. "Will you take up your position?"

Wolf nodded. He removed his overcoat and helmet, and accepted the pistol which his second held out to him. There was a long waiting, in which he heard the arbitrator read out the conditions. The words were no more than sounds in his ears.

"Herr von Braunfels," the arbitrator was saying, "I shall now count three. At three you will take aim. At the word '*Los!*' you will fire. For the space of three seconds, which I shall count aloud, you will then remain absolutely motionless. It will then be Graf Henning's turn to fire."

The seconds ranged themselves at five paces on either side. The arbitrator began.

"One—two—three!"

Wolf raised his revolver. At the word '*Los!*' he fired deliberately in the air. No one spoke except the arbitrator, who went on counting mechanically. "One—two—three!" Wolf stood like a stone pillar. For the first time he looked full in his opponent's face. He saw the cold, steadfast eyes trained along the barrel of the revolver. He knew that if the human will could accomplish it, his death was at hand, and he neither flinched nor wavered. The three seconds dragged themselves out into three eternities. In the first eternity he wondered idly where the bullet would strike him; in the second he thought a last time of Erna; in the third some inner voice whispered to

him, "A Braunfels! a Braunfels!" and, he drew himself a fraction straighter, steadied his gaze to meet the speeding death that was to strike him down in the morning of his life.

"*Los!*"

"Graf Henning, lay down your weapon."

The two commands broke almost simultaneously on the straining silence. Wolf heard them without understanding. His whole strength was concentrated on the effort of waiting for the one sound. It came at last—a sharp, clear pistol shot, which seemed to echo on and on in ever-widening circles till it died away into a sudden absolute silence.

Wolf von Braunfels swung on his heel, and without a moan sank face downwards to the ground.

IV

"My dear Braunfels, have you the strength to listen to me?"

Wolf nodded feebly. He was lying in his own bed, and the colonel was seated beside him. He fancied that he must be dying, for the elder man's face was softened almost beyond recognition, and there was an impulsive kindness in his hand-clasp.

"It is perhaps too soon to explain matters," he went on abruptly; "but I fancy you will be glad to know the truth. By the way, did you hear me order Henning not to fire?"

"I thought I heard something of the sort, but it all seemed a dream."

"Well, he fired, nevertheless. I was a little too late

on the field. As it was I had to call a council in the night to decide whether the duel ought to be stopped or not. The decision only left me about half an hour to spare. Still, I came in time to spoil his aim, which was one good thing, and probably saved your life. It only remains for us to make reparation."

Wolf opened his heavy eyes.

"To whom, Herr Oberst?"

"To you—and to another whom you will know hereafter. It is a long story, but I will try and make it as brief as possible. Let us imagine an old and noble family reduced to extreme poverty. Let us imagine two children—a boy and a girl—the girl beautiful and talented, the boy a ne'er-do-weel, but the last of his race. Let us give him a name—shall we say Henning?"

Wolf started painfully.

"Herr Oberst!" he exclaimed.

"Pray allow me to tell the story my own way, my dear Braunfels. The mother and father died. Only an old aunt remained to take care of them. In the usual course they grew up. The time came when the boy had to follow the career of his fathers; but there was no money—not a penny. The two women put their heads together. Their name, their family, was their god, their fetish, for which they were ready, as we all are, to make every sacrifice. So they swore an oath that the last Henning, so long as he proved worthy, should lack for nothing, but should live as his position required. The two women disappeared. They changed their name, and the younger adopted

a profession which brought in money enough, but which would have made her ancestors turn in their graves. All went well, and the boy lived on the fat of the land until his sister was foolish enough to fall in love with an officer. At the time she did not realise that with her marriage her secret and position as bread-winner would have to be surrendered. Her brother was quicker. He knew that the source of his wealth was to be cut off, and he did the one thing which a man of his character would do—he threatened her. He told her that he would force a duel with the man she was to marry, that he would kill him, and I don't know what else besides, unless she kept the secret and broke off her engagement. At first she refused, but between fear of his threats and respect for the fetish she yielded—but too late to stop the threatened quarrel. All she could do was to persuade her lover not to fight. This was, of course, impossible, but he did the next best thing according to his mistaken view of the situation—he decided to spare his adversary even at the cost of his own life. You will perceive that he was a chivalrous, if somewhat short-sighted, young man. At any rate, things might have gone pretty badly had it not been for the old aunt. That worthy soul had had enough of the fetish and a great deal too much of her nephew. So she went to the colonel of the latter's regiment, wormed out of him that the young man, for his own purposes, had thrown the vilest mud on his sister's name, and in a fit of indignation disclosed the whole secret. And the colonel and certain brother officers decided that

the nephew had proved himself unworthy of a gentleman's satisfaction, interrupted the duel, requested him to send in his papers, and depart for America on a prolonged tour, and—my dear Braunfels, surely the rest is clear to you?"

Wolf grasped the colonel's hand.

"You mean——" he began brokenly.

"That Fräulein Ameron has the misfortune to be Graf Henning's sister!" the old man answered with the satisfaction of one who has brought a good story to a successful finish. Wolf lay back with closed eyes. The colonel bent over him. "My dear Braunfels," he said, "you have been ill, and though you do not know it, the Gräfin Henning has nursed you like an angel—together a very fine woman—very fine. She is at present in the next room. Have you any message?"

Wolf von Braunfels opened his eyes wide.

"Tell her," he said, earnestly and happily, "that she at least owes it to me not to keep me waiting."

HUNTED DOWN

I

"A PIECE of rock animated by a mind," the cheerful little man in the corner thought to himself, "and a glacier with the possibility of a heart." This was his descriptive way of cataloguing the only two faces in the little group on the hotel veranda which interested him. The one face was a man's, the other a woman's, and both were made the more striking by the resemblance and the contrast between them. The man was not good to look on—at least, so his observer thought. He was tall, though he sat bunched up in his chair, and the hands linked loosely over his knee testified to a latent strength. Strength also, but of another kind, was engraved on the clean-shaven face, on the thin, tightly-set lips, which seemed compressed in some continuous effort, on the hawked nose and massive forehead, and in the piercing eyes. The woman, on the other hand, was beautiful. Like the man, she had left the first brightness of her youth behind her, but the glow remained, and one could scarcely suppose that it was the less perfect. Like the man, also,

she gave the impression of strength, mental and physical. The oval face was somewhat tanned by sun and air, the mouth was extraordinarily resolute, and, slight though her figure was, it breathed energy even in repose. Nevertheless, her appearance was stamped—marred, perhaps—by a certain reserve and coldness which might have been either inborn or acquired.

"You seem very thoughtful to-night, Mrs Nevill," the cheerful little man began. "I would give something to know what about." She smiled faintly, but did not turn.

"I was looking at that mountain," she said, "and wondering what it would bring me in the next day or two. You know, I make the ascent to-morrow." The man with the hawked nose looked up, not at her, but at the mountain she had spoken of. Night had already set in, and the jagged, rocky tooth of the Matterhorn stood out like a sombre giant against the purple darkness. There was no moon. Standing in its loneliness it seemed to tower immediately above them, a cruel and threatening shadow.

"You are not afraid?" he asked. It was the first time he had spoken that evening, and there was a slight stir of attention. Except that the visitors' book called him Edgar Haversham, no one knew anything about him, and conjecture was rife.

"No, I am not afraid," she answered. "I have climbed most of the mountains in Europe, and I learnt to forget fear—some years ago."

"There was a bad accident up there only a few

weeks back," someone said. "A rope broke—or was cut. Altogether rather a nasty business. It was said that one of the party lost her nerve——"

"Oh, a woman!" Haversham lay back in his chair and laughed. The laugh and the exclamation were charged with an unconcealed contempt. Also there was a sneer on his lips which did not tend to soften the harshness of his features. "A woman excuses herself with 'nerves' when she does things of which a man would be ashamed," he went on. "It is usually—as in this case—more self-interest than physical weakness."

"You despise women?" Erica Nevill asked.

"I have good reason to do so," he answered. One of the other ladies present giggled.

"A misogynist with a good reason!" she cried. "In justice to our sex you ought to tell us what it is."

"I have no objection. Do you wish to hear it?" He ignored the rest of the company, and looked straight into the beautiful face opposite him. The gaze was almost brutal in its directness, and suggested a challenge, but she met it without sign of annoyance.

"I did not know you were a woman-hater," she said, lifting her fine eyebrows. "It would certainly interest me very much to know why you are."

He shifted his position, so that the light from the overhanging lamp no longer fell on his face. Thus his expression, with whatever passions it might have revealed, remained hidden, but his hands, now clenched

on the arm of his chair and plainly visible, seemed to fill the blank, to emphasise, almost enlarge the meaning of his jerky sentences.

"My story—such as it is—is no secret," he began. "In a few weeks I shall be telling it in an English criminal court, and you will read it for yourself, with the advantage that you will understand more of it than the general public. Perhaps you will find it more interesting then, for I am not a good raconteur. Briefly, it is as follows: At an early age I was left parentless and homeless, and, with no capital save my abilities, thrown out into the world to shift for myself. This I tried to do with but little success, until chance brought me to Australia—where I met my friend."

One hand slightly relaxed, and his rough voice sounded a shade less harsh.

"I did him a service—a little thing, but it earned his gratitude, and from that moment we were inseparable. He was the same age as myself; not very talented perhaps, but rich and of engaging manners. It was to this latter attribute that he owed the former, an old and wealthy man having adopted him—like myself, he was an orphan—and made him his sole heir, in spite of the closer claims of a ne'er-do-well nephew. On this friend—I will call him Harry Stewert, after the father by adoption—I lavished all my hitherto unused powers of devotion. He returned my liking in equal part, and, thanks to his influence, my rise in the world became a rapid one. My friend became engaged. I met his *fiancée*

often, and was struck by her beauty and unusual culture. In those days I believed in women, and in my ignorance I felt that my friend's eulogies on her virtues had fallen short of the truth. I even envied him. After that, circumstances sent me to England, and both being bad correspondents, it did not seem strange to me that I heard nothing from Stewert. I myself had only written once or twice, and I imagined him busy with his forthcoming marriage. Nevertheless, my friendship remained unchanged. Five years later I returned, hoping to clasp my friend's hand, and found that he had died—in misery and of starvation."

He stopped again, and the pause was electric with smothered passion.

"From the woman he had married—not the woman I have spoken of, but a pretty little creature worn old with worry—I learnt the truth. Shortly after I had started on my travels the old Stewert had died, leaving no will."

Erica stirred slightly in her chair.

"No will!" he repeated, as though the movement had goaded him. "That was what the world said, but I knew that there had been one—Harry knew that there had been one. But there was no proof, and he had no other claim. He was left penniless; the nephew, a weak-minded fool, became sole heir."

"And the first woman, the *fiancée*, what became of her?" It was a man leaning against the veranda railings who asked the question. Erica Nevill had resumed her scrutiny of the distant peaks. She

seemed, with the practised eye of the mountaineer, to be measuring heights and distances, and to have lost all interest in the conversation. Only when Haversham laughed, she started as though the sound had jarred upon her ears.

"She threw him over," Haversham said, between his teeth. "Three months later, she married the nephew." There was a moment's silence. The man of placid content looked troubled.

"Of course that was pretty low down," he admitted, "but still——"

"There is worse to come," Haversham interrupted impatiently. "The will had been stolen—I was sure of it. Old Stewert was a man of business, and devoted to his adopted son. It was not likely he would have forgotten to provide for him. There was a thief somewhere, and at my friend's grave I swore I would hunt that thief down, cost what it might. I had no clue save that of a strong motive. The nephew was too much of a fool, but the woman he had married was clever enough to have done anything, and being a great favourite of old Stewert, she had had the run of his house. One thing and another pointed the same way, and I made up my mind. I knew, of course, that in all probability she would have destroyed all trace of her theft, but I left nothing to chance, knowing that the cleverest criminals often make the worst slips. I spent a fortune in the pursuit. I engaged the sharpest spies, the worst thieves. Three weeks ago"—he took a sharp breath—"my suspicions were confirmed. The

will was stolen from the woman's boxes, and is in my hands at this hour."

He got up suddenly and stood with his massive shoulders thrown back, his arms folded. A human prototype of the rugged mountain seemed to have sprung up in their very midst, and there was an uneasy stir among the pleasure-seeking little party.

"And you judge a whole sex by that one experience?" Mrs Nevill asked quietly.

"Our lives are not long enough to do otherwise than judge by the experiences we have time for," he retorted. "I believed in one woman, and saw in her the personification of goodness. She *seemed* good—many women *seem* good. This woman was treacherous—and a thief."

"And now that you have the will, what do you propose doing?" the man against the railings asked.

"What I intended to do from the beginning. I shall hunt her down. I hold the proof of her guilt, and I shall make her suffer in proportion as her treachery made my friend suffer. Besides, there are my friend's wife and children. The money belongs to them."

He spoke like a man whose heart has been turned to iron, and again there was an uncomfortable silence. Perhaps they were a little afraid of him, as civilised people are apt to be when they are sharply brought in contact with the elemental forces. Perhaps they naturally shrunk from a man who had spent his life playing the part of a blood-hound. Erica Nevill rose also to her feet, and stood facing him on the other

side of the table. Erect, she displayed the full dignity of her height, which was not less than his.

"It has all been very interesting," she said quietly, "and you have shown yourself an admirable dissembler. In all these weeks I should hardly have supposed that you had so serious a mission."

"I fear my little story has tired you," he said, looking at her searchingly. "You are pale."

"I am tired," she admitted, "and as I have an early start to-morrow I will say 'Good night.'" The men sprang up to let her pass, and there was a chorus of good wishes. Edgar Haversham hesitated, and then followed her to the door. There was a singular smile on his rugged face.

"May I accompany you—to-morrow?" he asked. She stood quite still.

"You wish to accompany—me?"

"Yes." The smile became less cynical and more humorous. "After all, this is our holiday—even I have my holidays—and on the mountain heights it is easy to forget the world's affairs—and one's own. What do you say? It would be rather amusing—bizarre, don't you think?" She looked at him penetratingly, and then she too smiled.

"Will it be really—your holiday?"

"Really."

"Very well, then. At four o'clock!" She passed into the hotel, and a moment later, without addressing any farewell to his late companions, Haversham followed her. The little group exchanged glances. The man with the cheerful face leant over to his

pretty neighbour, with whom he was on intimate terms.

"She is a widow," he whispered. "I wonder if he wants to marry her, and if she will have him!" The pretty neighbour shuddered.

"I don't know," she said. "Personally I would rather marry the——" She did not finish the sentence, but the missing word was easily supplied by those who heard her.

II

For the moment the danger and difficulties were over. They stood together on the summit, gazing out on to the world of ice and snow beneath them. Hitherto Haversham had been sternly taciturn, but now he turned to his companion, and though he spoke with the assumption of carelessness, he could not altogether conceal the emotion in his voice.

"It is no wonder we poor groping mortals picture heaven as a place neither to the east nor west, but straight above us," he said. "Even here one has a foretaste."

She nodded.

"Yes; and it seems all the more a foretaste because for so many it has been the gate."

"It might be for us."

"Yes; easily."

"Very easily. A slip and we should be wiser than the wisest. Not a bad solution on the whole."

She looked at him keenly.

"You are not the man of last night," she said,

"He had no need of a solution. It lay in his hands. Have you become any the less resolute?"

"I am changed," he said simply. "I am the man I should have been but for circumstances. The circumstances have been left behind in the valley."

"In a few hours we shall return to them."

"Yes," he assented. "Then it will be all over." His face had hardened a little as he spoke, but it relaxed again instantly, and with the harshness of the mouth there vanished also the pitiless light in the steel eyes, the threatening force of the great forehead. Behind the mask there were signs of humour, kindness, and of a possible tenderness.

"You are better so," she said thoughtfully. "Sad that it cannot last."

"That is impossible."

She laughed under her breath. "I know it is impossible. I knew two nights ago. Of course I recognised you from the first, though I did not know that you recognised me. Much less did I know—as I know now—that you were here to hunt me down."

"I did not come only to hunt you down," he said. "I came to see what sort of a woman you were."

"Did you not remember?"

"Yes, I remembered; I was not likely to forget." He laughed grimly. "It was because of you I threw up everything and went away to England—ten years ago." He heard her draw her breath quickly, and went on: "You will thus understand and forgive a natural curiosity. I had thought you a sort of earthly goddess. When I found out what you were, I

was anxious to see how far I had been a young fool in letting myself be deceived." He spoke with a sudden return of his old brutal directness, but she answered without anger.

"Yes were very much deceived. As you said, I am a thief."

"You admit it?" He turned to her impulsively.

"I admit it for the good reason that it is the undeniable truth." For a moment he stood silent, his lips compressed again, his brows knitted. Then he threw back his shoulders, as though shaking off a burden.

"We had better be starting back," he said. "It is getting late." She nodded.

"And when we are back in the valley the truce will be over?"

"Yes." He called the guides, who were standing at a little distance, and, having reassumed the ropes, they began the descent in the same order as they had come, Haversham leading. After the first slope from the summit the way became dangerous, and for a moment he turned and looked back at her.

"If anything happened to me now," he said, smiling curiously, "and a rope broke, you would be saved."

Something flashed up in her eyes, a light that was the signal of a smothered, hidden fire, but her lips remained tight closed, and he went on, picking his path carefully along the ice surface. Erica Nevill had time to look about her. It was in a sense her farewell to a world she loved, and it was not the less passionate because her face gave no sign of the inner

conflict. She knew that for her it was over. The white mountains would see her no more. Once in the valley the circumstances which had changed the man in front of her into a pitiless machine would close in and overshadow her life—perhaps forever. With a clear perception of what the future held in store she strove to imprint upon her memory every peak and every glacier, and even as she did so the unforeseen catastrophe swept down upon them both. She was conscious of what seemed a violent blow flinging her upon her back, of a cloud of snow and ice, of a jarring, grating sound, and a sensation of being held taut between two straining forces. It was a mere instant, in which heaven and earth seemed to stand still, breathless with suspense; then, before she regained her feet, the force behind her yielded, and she was dragged with the speed of lightning down the glassy slope. In a dim, uncertain haze she saw Haversham in front of her. He too had fallen on his back, and was making desperate efforts to stop their wild flight with his hands and feet. The sight of his unavailing efforts roused her. With her whole strength she drove her axe, which she had managed to retain, into the snow as she flashed past. For an instant it seemed to hold, then the force and rapidity of their descent wrenched the tool from her hands, and they sped on with redoubled swiftness. Haversham shouted something to her, but she did not catch his words, which seemed to blow past her on the wings of a cutting wind. But she knew that the smooth sheet of snow and ice along which they were gliding

ended abruptly in a precipice, and that in a moment they must reach it. After that there would be a ghastly fall—and the end. The idea that here was the solution did not occur to her. The love of life was uppermost, and she was fighting for hers and his. She took in the situation with the quickness of despair. Either Haversham's attempts to stop had been more successful, or she had unconsciously increased her own speed; at any rate, the distance between them had lessened, and the rope was no longer drawn taut. At the edge of the precipice a single block of ice jutted out like a clumsy spear over the gulf beneath. It was the only irregularity along the smooth surface, the only possible obstacle between them and death. If she could steer herself on to the opposite side, if the rope and the rock held good—! If! It was a wild plan, demanding for its success a strength she dared hardly suppose she possessed, yet it was the only one. She dug her nailed boots into the snow, and with every nerve drawn to the supreme effort guided her descent. Fortunately, Haversham was sliding in the same direction, and did not drag her from her course. The whole incident lasted scarcely a couple of seconds, though to the two helpless beings gliding to their destruction it seemed an eternity. Erica was now almost abreast of Haversham.

"Save yourself if you can!" he shouted. She took no notice. In a flash she saw him disappear over the edge; in the same instant like a tiger she half-sprang, half rolled herself on to the opposite side of the rock towards which she had been bearing. She fell for

several feet before the shock came. Then the rope tightened with a violent jerk, and she was shot upwards. She felt Haversham's superior weight dragging her after him, and, dazed and blinded, she clung to the smooth ice, wedging her knees beneath the overhanging rock. It was a moment of crisis and of sickening suspense. A curious quiet and calm crept over her, a sensation of the whole world standing still and waiting, then a chaos, in which the world and life fell away into a dead darkness. The half of Erica Nevill had fainted in the physical agony of the strain, but the subconscious side, the instinct remained awake and active. Not a muscle relaxed or yielded in her tenacious hold, and when she opened her eyes a moment later, goaded back by the torture of the rope under her arm-pits, she found herself for the moment arrested on the very brink of death. She listened, and through the roaring in her ears she heard the soft thud of a body against the rocks beneath. She tried to call out, but for a moment she dared not unlock her tight-set lips lest she should scream with pain. It was a voice calling which aroused her to the effort.

"What has happened—who is there?" Haversham shouted.

"I, Mrs Nevill!" she replied faintly. She could say no more. The rope had cut through her thick tweed coat, and was burying itself in her flesh—deeper and deeper with every movement and with every breath.

"Where are the guides?"

"I don't know; the rope must have broken."

"Are you holding me up—alone?"

"Yes."

"If it wasn't for me, could you get into a place of safety?"

"I think so."

"Have you a knife?"

"Yes."

"Then cut the rope—save yourself." There was no answer. Haversham, hanging like a stone above the hideous depth which seemed to have no bottom, glanced down and set his teeth. It is one thing to be swept into eternity, another to hover about it, waiting. "Be quick!" he shouted. Something flashed past him, a dark speck which vanished in an instant into the mists beneath. "What was that?" he called again. The answer came like a groan.

"The knife."

"You threw it away?"

"Yes."

"Why?" She made no answer.

Haversham swore aloud. "Why didn't you do as I told you? You can't hold out."

"Oh, yes; I can hold out. They will send help—soon."

She had tried to speak cheerfully, but the torture she was enduring rang out of every syllable. It goaded Haversham to attempt what seemed impossible. He swung himself against the jagged side of the precipice, trying to get a foot-hold. Twice he failed, and each time he knew his movement had caused her increased suffering.

"I am going to try and climb up," he shouted. "Can you bear it?"

"Yes!" The fourth time he succeeded in getting his feet on to a piece of jutting out rock, and the tension on the rope relaxed.

"Get yourself into a safe position," he ordered. "Be ready to stand tight." She made no answer, but by the swaying of the rope he knew that she had obeyed. He began to climb. It was only a matter of eight feet or so, but he had nothing to help him, and the rock was in places as smooth as ice, yet he had no idea of failing. It was as though he had suddenly become invulnerable, infallible, because her life too hung in the balance. Ten minutes passed, such as neither ever forgot. When he at last dragged himself gasping with exhaustion over the edge he saw that she had planted herself in a half-lying, half-sitting position, with her feet thrust against the rock. The rope was still round her waist, and as he had climbed she had twisted the loose cord about her hands. As she saw him she smiled and rolled over on one side, with her face on her arm. He crept up to her, and dragged her into a place of safety. When he looked back he saw that from the edge of the precipice to where she lay there was a bright trail of blood. There was blood also on her hands and face and on the jacket where the ropes had cut through. He shouted for help till the echo seemed to fill the mountain, but there was no answer. Erica opened her eyes.

"You go on—leave me," she whispered. "It

would be—for the best.” He shook his head, and laughed sternly.

“I will not leave you,” he said, “neither now nor——”

He did not finish the sentence. He bent down and raised her in his powerful arms, and slowly and carefully picked his way towards the ridge from whence they had fallen. When he at last stood upon the top he paused, panting for breath, and looked down on the white unconscious face against his shoulder. In those short minutes it had grown old and haggard. He held her closer to him, and with set teeth began the descent into the valley.

III

It was many weeks after that he came to her in her little hotel sitting-room. She lay on a sofa drawn up to the window where the sunlight fell on the rich hair and on the pale thin face. In the full flush of her youth she had been beautiful, but never so beautiful as she seemed to him in that moment. He came to her and took the transparent hand in his.

“I would have come before,” he said, with a new gentleness, “but they would not let me. I want to thank you for my life.” She smiled.

“But for you I should have died upon the mountain,” she answered. “You made the impossible possible, and brought me down. You see, we are quits.”

“Not quite.” With an abrupt movement he drew a sealed packet from his pocket and laid it in her

hands. She turned it over wonderingly; then a flash of recognition passed over her thin features.

"The will!" she exclaimed.

"Yes; it was ~~taken~~—stolen, if you like—some months ago by a *femme de chambre* of yours ~~in~~ my pay. Now I look back it seems a mean thing to have done, but Harry had died in misery and want, and I was like a tiger that has tasted blood. Now I am sorry. Mrs Nevill"—he had taken a seat beside her, and now he leant forward, and his voice trembled with an eagerness he could not conceal—"Mrs Nevill, I know I ought not to trouble you with questions, you have been so ill; but I have thought and puzzled till I feel I shall go mad. I cannot understand—I cannot believe now that you could ever have done so cruel and wicked a thing. I cannot believe that you stole Harry's fortune."

"I stole the will," she said tonelessly.

"Why?"

"To save the man I loved—then."

A shadow passed over his face—a shadow such as might have sprung from a jealousy reaching far back into the past.

"I cannot understand," he repeated. Then he looked her resolutely in the eyes. "But that does not alter what I have come to tell you. I have something to explain—and to ask. You remember what I said that day on the Matterhorn? I told you that years ago I had left Harry—thrown up my chances—because I knew I could not remain near you and be loyal to my friend. I had never cared for a woman,

but I cared for you. It is true. And it was true even when I put continents between us, even when I suspected what you had done, when I knew that you were guilty. Your image remained ineffaceable. That was the reason I came here two months ago. I wanted to know you, to probe down through the fascination that had held me, to your heart—and find you—bad. I wanted to destroy the image, so that I could act resolutely—without wavering.”

“And——?” She was smiling faintly.

“It was no good. Every day engraved your name deeper into my life. But I felt bound—by my friendship to Harry. I could not turn back. That night on the veranda I told the story, so that you should know what I must do—and why. It was my warning.” She looked at him.

“I thought it was a threat—that you hated me,” she said. “And when you asked to accompany me I thought it was part of the torture you had prepared.”

“I asked you because I had promised myself one last day’s happiness,” he answered, with a bitter laugh. “When we stood together on the summit I thought it was all over between us. When I saw you lying in the snow—in your blood—for my sake”—his voice grew rough and unsteady—“I knew that it was not over. Neither Harry nor the whole world could have made me raise a hand against you. I loved you, and you had saved my life.” He threw back his shoulders. “I have come now to ask you, Erica, will you be my wife?” The colour rushed

to her pale cheeks. She lifted the sealed document from her lap.

"And this?"

"Forget it. I will atone to Harry's children in another way. Forget it, and all I ever said. I do not understand why you did it, but I believe in you. I cannot help myself."

"Why do you believe in me?"

"You saved my life."

"Then it is gratitude?"

"No," he answered, "it is admiration." He took the paper from her hands. "See," he said, "I will tear it up. The cloud between us will be gone for ever." He spoke firmly, but the hand that held the will trembled. She saw his hesitation.

"You can tear it into a thousand pieces," she said, "but you know as well as I do that the cloud would remain between us. There would always be the suspicion, the doubt. It would poison our lives—and our love." He buried his face in his hands. He knew that she was right, though he fought against the truth with the energy of despair.

"Erica, if I could only understand!" he groaned.

"Do not try to understand," she answered. "For your own happiness, go away from here and forget."

"I cannot." Then he looked up at her again. The moment's weakness was over. The old dogged determination had crept into his face. "I do not believe that you stole this—that you are capable of stealing. I might have believed it weeks ago, but not now. A woman who saves her enemy is not

the woman to commit a mean, treacherous crime. In spite of everything, in spite of yourself, I trust you." She made no answer, and he saw that her lips were tight closed. He rose to his feet. "Hitherto I have spent my life in a fruitless search," he said. "I have found the thing I sought for, but I am no nearer the truth. Now I will find the truth. The will is in my hands. I have yet to learn its true history, and I *will* learn it, if I have to search the whole world." He went towards the door, but before he reached it she had sprung to her feet.

"No, you must not!" she cried impetuously. "I swear to you, I have told you the truth. I stole the will."

"Why, then, did you keep such damning evidence against yourself?"

"Nevill would not let me destroy it. He made me promise to keep it always." He saw that she had said more than she intended, and with the swiftness of a sleuth-hound he followed up the clue she had given him.

"That means that it was useful to him—a weapon perhaps against someone. Against you?" She shook her head. "Against whom, then?" She made no answer. With a gentle strength he forced her back on to her sofa. "Tell me the truth, Erica. It is the only way. If you do not tell me I shall find out for myself. You know me too well to think I shall ever rest until I do know." He held both her hands, and it was as though the force of his will hypnotised her. "Why did you steal that will?" he asked.

She looked him in the face with the sudden calm of one whose decision is made.

"Because it was a forgery." For a moment he said nothing. His eyes had become blank and stony.

"Prove it!"

She took a bunch of keys from the table and gave them to him.

"Do not blame me afterwards," she said. "In that case over there you will find the proof." She turned away her head, and five minutes passed in tense silence. When he came back to her side he held an open letter in his hand, and his face was whiter than her own.

"I have found this," he said. "It is from old Stewert to Nevill, your husband. He says he has disinherited Harry. Why?"

"Harry had disobeyed him. He had thrown me over for the sake of an actress—the woman you knew as his wife. Yes"—as he raised a protesting hand—"I know you believed otherwise, but this is the truth. I loved him, but he had never loved me. Though I did not know it then, our marriage was the old man's wish, and I suppose Harry could not agree to it."

Edgar Haversham took the will. She saw him compare letter by letter the two signatures, and his eyes were like those of a man who sees the edifice of a great faith crumble to ashes.

"A forgery!" he muttered.

"Do not blame him too much," she said gently. "Harry was young and, when he did it, desperate. He bribed two servants to witness the signature,

and to place it in the box where the first will had been kept. But afterwards, when he thought of the consequences if his crime were discovered, he was afraid—and ashamed. He flung himself upon my mercy. He could not regain the forged will—he had been banished from the house. But for the sake of my old love for him I promised I would destroy the forgery. The theft was easy enough. At the time I was nursing the dying old man, and he trusted me with everything. One night when he slept I opened the box and took the will." She stopped, as though before some ugly memory, and then went on. "It was at that moment Nevill came into the room and found me."

"Good Heavens!"

"He hated Harry, and the price of his silence was a high one. I married him."

"Erica, you sacrificed yourself!"

"Can one call it sacrifice? In spite of everything I had loved Harry, and one cannot harm the man one has loved."

Edgar Haversham knelt beside her. He took her hands in his.

"Erica, you saved Harry, and you would have saved his memory at the cost of all that makes life worth living. You did it because you loved him. Why did you save the man who had meant to hunt you down to misery and disgrace? Why did you save me, Erica?" She bent and kissed him.

"For the same reason," she answered gently.

THE LAST TURN

"A CIRCUS!" exclaimed the primly dressed little lady with the equally primly dressed wax doll. "Look, mother, a circus!"

"A circus!" murmured the urchin, with his blue hands in the ragged pockets of his ragged trousers. "Blow my buttons, a bloomin' circus!"

"Fancy now, one of them clown shows with hacrobats and tight ladies!" said Mrs Jones, who was standing in the doorway of her grocery with her arms akimbo and an expression of shocked interest on her round face. "Bless my soul! what is Mayford a-comin' to?"

Whereupon the stout, fur-coated gentleman who had been lowering behind the folds of the tent pounced out with a handful of bills which he distributed gracefully to the interested, together with a flood of information.

"Ze finest show on ze earth, ladies and chentlemen, patronised by all ze crowned heads of Europe! Real tigers, real lions, real 'orses, and, last, ze famous Beroni Flyers, ze greatest vondorrs of ze age! Come and see! Ze very zing for ze Christmas 'olidays, for ze children and for ze ladies!"

It was a little doubtful whether his accent was German, French or cockney—or a mixture of all three—but it was certainly unusual, and it impressed the Mayfordites, even to the genteel couple who immediately walked on.

"Mother, mightn't we? It would be such a nice Christmas treat!" pleaded the prim little lady struggling between the behests of primness and the promptings of a natural excitement.

"If them crowned 'eads 'ave patronised it, it must be all right," soliloquised the grocery lady, who had been much mollified by the showman's deference.

The urchin made no comment on the subject of the proprieties.

"Where am Hi goin' to sneak tuppence from?" he asked aloud, as though seeking information from the occult powers.

Meanwhile Señor Savoni had dived back into the tent, for it was snowing, and snow does not tend to improve fur collars of doubtful lineage.

"I guess I've nabbed three of 'em at any rate," he remarked, rubbing his hands. "We mayn't do much to-night, but if we put our best foot forward we'll draw 'em all right for to-morrow. Wake up there, you two blighters!"

His accent, his expressions, and his manner had undergone a transformation which would have done credit to a quick-change artist, but the man and woman whom he thus addressed seemed in nowise astonished. The man who was lying on his elbow in the sand of the arena merely shrugged his shoulders.

In spite of his languid attitude there was an alertness about his figure which harmonised with the restless discontent of his expression.

The woman seated on the low barrier beside him laughed.

"The Beroni Flyers will do the trick, don't you worry, boss," she said. "There's nothing these pious folk won't do to see their fellow-Christians risk their necks. It's a first-class money-making turn, and you know it, you old bone-grinder!"

Señor Savoni edged off towards the central entrance.

"You're a vicious pack o' goods," he said admiringly from a safe distance. "But you're game! So long!"

He disappeared, and as though his big presence had caused both light and noise the big tent became suddenly dark, and the silence was unbroken save for the drip of the melted snow as it oozed through a worn-out part of the canvas. The man lying in the sand looked up into his companion's face. She was leaning forward with her chin resting in the palm of her hand, and in the shadow which the gathering winter twilight threw about them he could only see the dark eyes and the white gleam of the imitation pearls about her neck. He drew himself upright, and his hand, gliding up her arm, gripped her fingers and pulled them down to the level of his face. His eyes rested scowlingly on the tawdry little ring, and then he jerked her hand roughly away from him.

"Bah!" he said.

For the first time she moved as though startled

from a dream, and with a gesture of appeal laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"Don't, Jim!" she said tersely. "It isn't my fault. How was I to know? It was before you came——"

"But you could chuck 'im, Nell!"

She shivered.

"I daren't. Geoff, he's a quiet man enough, but he'd kill me and he'd kill you if he guessed."

"Gammon, my girl! 'Tain't that wot's troublin' you—you ain't no coward. Say wot you like, you've got a weak spot in you for 'im—I knows that well enough."

She snapped her fingers.

"Wot's love, anyhow? It don't count. Wot matters is life and the fun we get out of it. And poor old Geoff, he hasn't got a spark of gumption in him—a good old steady pacer; never drinks, never swears, saves all he can get, and hasn't a farthing over for a fling, always a-thinking of his wife and his home—wot he's going to have." She laughed. "Just not my sort," she added.

"And me?" He was sitting upright, and their faces were very close in the darkness.

"Oh, you're a devil, Jim, a regular 'un. That's why I——"

"You wot?"

"Sh!" she hissed softly. A shadow had fallen across them, and, looking up, Jim Reynolds, otherwise the first flyer in the Beroni Trio, saw a man's figure silhouetted against the open doorway. Like a snake Reynolds writhed himself along the sand till a full

yard lay between him and the woman. It was the work of a moment.

"Is that you, Nell?" the newcomer asked.

"Yes."

"Where's Jim?"

"Here, too."

"That's good." He came in, and, throwing off his dripping overcoat, seated himself beside her with a big sigh of satisfaction. Even in the half darkness his appearance was vaguely grotesque. His clothes made no pretence of fitting his immense, broad-shouldered figure, and his round face was like that of a clown whose features have grown fixed in the ludicrous grimace of his profession.

"Gee!" he went on, mopping his face dry from the melted snow-flakes. "I'll bet neither of you can guess wot I've been up to!"

"I can't guess, and I don't care," the woman retorted; "but you're a fool to go out in this weather. If you get stiff, our job will be off, and you know it."

Her tone was unfriendly, and she jerked the shoulder nearest him as though his proximity irritated her.

He laid his big hand timidly on her knee.

"There, there, Nell, don't you take on so. My old muscles will hold out these two nights, right enough—and after that, wot's the odds? I've saved enough to set us up high and dry in some neat little bit of a place; it's all I'm a-wanting of. Wot do you say, Nell?" She made no answer, and he went on dreamily: "That's wot I was a-thinking of this afternoon. This sort of life ain't nothing for a fine-

grained sort like you, Nell; and it ain't nothing for me, though I'm a tough old bag of tricks and don't count. I'm sick of it, and I hate to see you risk your pretty neck every evening just to amuse those gaping fools down there." He jerked his thumb behind him at the empty boxes. "So when I ran across a downy bit of a nest this afternoon I said to myself, 'That's the ticket!' I had a look at it, and it's dirt cheap, with a bit of garden for us and—and the kids if we had any, and a fowl run. I've often thought we might make an extra bit with poultry keeping. Wot do you say, Nell?"

"I?" she laughed angrily. "Nothing."

"And you, Jim? You're a tidy man with your wits; wot do you think of it?"

The man seated with his knees hunched up to his chin looked up. There was an ugly scowl on his brows which the darkness hid.

"I think you're a demned fool," he said. "We're doin' fine—fairly haulin' in the checks, and the life is good enough. Wot do you want to break it all up for? Wot's goin' to become of me? You're a bad pal, and that's straight!"

Geoff Carter made a deprecatory movement.

"I'm real sorry, Jim," he said. "It ain't true that I'm a bad pal, but it's true enough that we've done pretty fine together, and that it's all got to change. Things can't go on for ever. I ain't wot I was; one's muscles get stiffish after a bit; and besides, there's Nell to be considered. It's a rough life, Jim; well enough for us, but hard on the women. And then, it's

a year come to-morrow that we were plighted. It's time we settled down." He held out his hand. "It don't need to upset you, old man. A tidy chap like you will always find his job. I'm only an old stager wot does the holding-up business in your tricks; any man with a bit of muscle would do as well for you. Besides, if things went crooked, you've always got a bed and a square meal with us, pal."

There was no answer, and Jim Reynolds appeared not to notice the extended hand. A whistle sounded shrilly from somewhere behind the scenes, and a moment later the electric globe hanging from the roof of the tent brightened to a white ball of fire. Outside there was the sound of the box-office being opened and the chink of money.

The woman rose and arranged the brightly-coloured shawl about her shoulders.

"Come on!" she said curtly, "the show's going to begin."

Geoff Carter walked at her side across the soft sand, and suddenly he took her arm and drew her gently closer to him.

"Nell, I shall be right glad when it's all over and done with—this life. You don't know what it'll mean to me to see you mistress in our own bit of a home. Then you'll be yourself again, Nell, like you was this time a year ago. Do you remember? It was Christmas Eve when you gave me your word and we talked together of the home we were going to make. A year ago; and to-morrow it'll all come true, Nell! To-morrow'll be our last turn, girl!"

They had reached the entrance leading into the stables and dressing-rooms. The woman threw a glance over her shoulder at the man walking behind them. She saw his face, and her own whitened whilst her eyes flashed with a sudden triumph.

"You're getting a bit soft, my man," she said mockingly. "You'd better keep your mind on your job, or you'll be dropping one of us. We ain't got no use for poetry in the flying business. So long!"

And she disappeared into the magnified rabbit-hutch which served as the 'first lady's' dressing-room and slammed the door violently in his face.

The first of the two grand performances with which Mayford was to be regaled passed off very much as Señor Savoni had anticipated. The audience was scanty but enthusiastic, and promised better things for the following night.

"That 'drop trick' of yours did it, Jim," the "boss" said complacently. "They likes to have their flesh creep, these giddy folk."

Which adjective was possibly meant as ironical, for the inhabitants of Mayford in their most dissipated moments had never deserved the title of "giddy." Nevertheless, the Señor's judgment was right in so far that Jim's "drop trick" had certainly added the crown to a triumphal evening.

"It was that awful," as Mrs Jones related to her family on her return. "The little man, 'e climbed up to the top of the tent and came down like a catherine wheel, head over heels. I screamed, for I thought 'e was a-goin' straight for to break 'is neck, but t'other,

him with the comic clothes as was swingin' 'ead downwards, for all the world like a Japanese monkey"—it is possible that Mrs Jones intended to refer to a chimpanzee—"jst caught 'im as 'e went past, and them two swung together as though that sort o' thing was as usual as washin' one's face. But I tell you, my dears, my 'eart was right in my mouth. But I'd go again, I would, really. It's a sight no heddicated person should miss."

And her opinion was shared by a considerable number of the audience, judging from the applause on that first night, and the "boss" had all reason to be well satisfied with himself and the world in general.

As to the performers who had worked such wonders in Mrs Jones' anatomy, they went their way as though nothing unusual had happened. In the shed at the back of the circus Geoff Carter was exchanging the grotesque, ill-fitting evening-dress which had caused the youth of Mayford so much mirth, for a rough and not very clean stable jacket and apron. Somehow or other he looked scarcely less ludicrous. The paint was still thick on his face, and he had forgotten to remove the yellow wig which covered his close-cropped head.

Reynolds, who had not yet changed, stood watching him, his arms folded over his chest, a sarcastic smile about his mouth.

"Where are you off to?" he asked abruptly as Carter turned to go.

"Round to see that the hosses are all right for the night. Are you coming?"

"No."

"All right. Good night, old pal."

Reynolds made no answer. He waited, listening intently, until the footsteps had died away; and then, with a quickness curiously unlike his former apparent indolence, he slipped a greatcoat over his thin tights and opened the door. It was still snowing hard. Here and there a caravan window threw a patch of yellow light on the white surface of the little market square, but for the rest everything seemed buried in silence and darkness. Reynolds closed the door softly behind him, and, with his collar turned up about his ears, picked his way stealthily and rapidly across the snow. Of the five caravans belonging to the circus one was apparently deserted. There was no light in the windows, and as he drew nearer he saw that the door was open and swinging backwards and forwards in the draught. He made no sound till he stood close beside the wooden steps, where the shadow engulfed him. Then he whistled softly. In an instant a white face gleamed ghost-like against the darkness.

"Nell!" he whispered.

She stretched out her hand, and he caught it and covered it with savage kisses.

"Nell, you knew I was coming?"

"I guessed. Where's Geoff?"

"With the 'osses. Don't you be afraid, Nell; wot are you a-going to do?"

"I don't know." Her whisper sounded sullen and defiant. "We're to be married 'fore the new year, he

says, and settle down. Settle down!" She laughed. "Can't you see me, Jim, settled down in a cottage with the pigs and poultry—the!"

"'E's mad!" he said between his teeth. "A life like that ain't nothin' for you, my girl. You want the lights and the people a-clappin' you, and the gawdies. You want a man who'll make things hum for you—a regular man, no bloomin' country parson."

She laughed softly.

"You'd make things hum, wouldn't you, Jim? You'd beat me, too, I dare say; but it'd be life all the same—real life, not wot Geoff wants."

"Chuck 'im, Nell, chuck 'im! 'E ain't man enough for such as you!" He had crept up the narrow steps to her side, and his hot breath fanned her face. "Nell, I want you, my girl!"

She drew back a little, but her hands lay passive in his.

"I daren't! He'd kill us both if he knew."

"'E don't need to know. To-morrow evening our job's out in this show. I'll come round for you when it's all over; and when he finds out it'll be too late—we shall be miles away and out of reach."

"Jim, I daren't!"

"Yes, you dare—and you've got to choose!" His voice grew rough and imperative. "You've got to choose, Nell. Think wot it means! Geoff's wife has done with the good things. 'E'll shut 'er up in 'er four walls, and she'll never see the footlights again, nor 'ave a soul to tell 'er she's got a pretty face. She'll grow old and dull, and 'e'll never notice it. 'E'll

live in his garden with 'is cabbages and never know that she's a-eatin' 'er 'eart out with loneliness. 'E won't never give 'er a ribbon or a trinket——"

"He never does," she broke in bitterly. "He always says he's a-saving for the home. You see—not even for Christmas——" She broke off, her tone full of resentment and wounded vanity.

Reynolds bit her hand till the cheap little ring bit into her flesh.

"Nell, you've got to choose—and to choose now. To-morrow it will be too late. To-morrow we've got to say 'Good-bye' to each other. 'Ave you thought of that? We've been such good pals; we've worked so fine together. You've always done your best with me—better than with 'im, and 'e knows it. Nell, you and me together—we'd grow rich; we'd travel, we'd see the world, and there'd be no rotten skinflinting. You should have everything your 'eart desired—trinkets, fine clothes, good livin'. Maybe it wouldn't last for ever, but wot's the odds? We should 'ave lived."

She listened breathlessly to his rough eloquence. She no longer shrank from him; her fair head rested against his shoulder.

"How you make me see things, Jim! It makes me hungry. I'm so young yet; I ain't the settling-down sort. Once I thought I was—with Geoff—but then you came, and then—then it was all different. I began to want the fun, the excitement, like you do, only——"

"Only wot? Oh, I know!" he laughed. "You've

got a sort of 'ankering after 'im still. That'll pass, my girl. I ain't afraid of that. That sort of namby-pambyishness don't last. Only you've got to choose. It's me and life, Nelly, or Geoff and you know wot."

"Yes, I know." She took a long, deep breath, and then suddenly she clung to him with a smothered exclamation of fear. "Jim, wot's that? I thought I saw a shadow—over there on the snow!"

He patted her shoulder soothingly.

"'Tain't nothing; you don't need to be afraid," he said. Nevertheless he waited and listened with suspended breath. From the tent across the narrow stretch of snow they heard the neigh of a horse and the sound of rough voices raised in dispute. But around them the silence seemed unbroken. "'Tain't nothing," he repeated. "The quiet makes one jumpy; we ain't made for the quiet, you and me. Think wot it'd mean, always like that, Nell; always the quiet until you went down into your grave."

She clung to him, and he kissed her triumphantly. "'Ave you chosen? Wot's it to be, Nell?"

"You and life, Jim?" she answered. "You and life, Jim!"

Footsteps sounded on the crisp snow. With a swift, agile movement he slipped to the ground and stood for an instant plunged in the darkness, his face lifted to hers.

"To-morrow night then, Nell!"

"I'll be ready, Jim."

The door closed, and he waited, listening. The

footsteps receded, and presently he crept away, stealthily and keeping to the shadow of the tent.

It was Christmas Eve.

The Mayfordites had made every use of the chance offered them, and Savoni's circus was packed from floor to ceiling. There was the prim little lady with her family in one of the "boxes"; there was Mrs Jones in her Sunday best in the respectable two-shilling seats; there was the urchin in the standing-room, where he made himself peculiarly objectionable with alternate peppermints and oranges.

Señor Savoni occupied the centre of the ring, from whence he directed the proceedings. He was marvelously got up in evening-dress, with rows of orders from "them crowned 'eads" on his big chest, and the crack of his whip rang jubilantly above the blare of the brass band. In truth, he had reason to be pleased. Not only was the "house" sold out, but even the most refractory animals had gone through their turns with unusual docility, and the clown's witticisms had been well received.

The clown was Geoff Carter—in disguise. For the sake of the extra salary he performed the maid-of-all-work's business in the show, and as he stood there at the entrance to the arena he cut a doubly ludicrous figure, his loose, parti-coloured clothes hiding what was magnificent in his build and making him seem merely a ponderous, clumsy hulk.

Señor Savoni brought his fat hand down with a jovial thump on his "star's" shoulder.

"Chirrup!" he said. "It's the flyers' turn next, and you aren't even in your togs. Hurry, my hearty!"

Carter nodded and went docilely towards the dressing-room. On the way he passed Nell and his pal, but he did not seem to see them. They looked after him till he had disappeared and then at each other.

"'E doesn't seem exactly in Christmas spirits," Reynolds said mockingly. "Wot's the matter with 'im? 'As 'e 'ad to part with some of 'is precious savings to buy you a fairing, Nell?"

She laughed loudly.

"Not he!" she said, "not he!" She pirouetted in an apparent overflow of high spirits, and the "boss," who had been watching her, clapped his hands.

"You're looking fine!" he said appreciatively. "You've got to bring the house down, you three. It's your last turn in my show, and you must do your old friend credit."

"That's all right, bone-grinder!" she retorted. "Mind you invite us all to your estate when you've bought it. It's we as have made your fortune for you, you know."

"I certainly shall not forget you," the Señor said graciously.

Nell burst out laughing again. She had laughed a great deal that day, and there was a hectic flush about her cheeks which heightened the brightness of her hair and the uneasy sparkle in her eyes. As the "boss" had intimated, she was looking her best, and her best was good—after her style. The flame-

coloured bodice revealed the whiteness of her neck and shoulders, the short black silk skirt reaching to the knees; the black, gold-embroidered stockings accentuated the slender beauty of her build.

Reynolds' dark eyes devoured her hungrily.

"Oh, my girl!" he said under his breath.

She seemed not to hear him. The bell had rung, and Geoff once more stood at their side, waiting for the signal for their entry. He was dressed in the usual "comic" evening clothes, and the yellow wig sat absurdly awry. Jim Reynolds smiled half pityingly, half scornfully, but Nell's colour had suddenly faded. Whether there was something in Carter's bull-dog face which alarmed her, or whether her keener woman's eyes penetrated below the ludicrous get-up to the grand strength of the man and found there a new source of fear, she herself probably could not have told. Her gay smile became stereotyped and forced.

"Wot's wrong, Geoff?" she asked, with an attempt at unconcern. "Got the hump?"

He looked at her, but did not answer.

"You must buck up," she went on in the same tone, but tinged with a shade of affection. "It's our last turn, you know, Geoff."

"Yes, our last turn," he repeated mechanically.

The signal sounded. Nell and her companion sprang lightly into the sandy arena amidst the plaudits of the expectant Mayfordites. Geoff Carter lumbered in behind and the crowd laughed. Contrasted with the two graceful figures he looked like

some strange acrobatic elephant as he climbed laboriously up among the ropes which hung from the roof of the tent. Yet there was an unobtrusive skill in his apparently clumsy movements. Whilst his partners swung from bar to bar and performed break-neck feats upon the ropes, it was none the less his steady strength which formed the mainstay of their performance. It was his powerful hands which held Nell as Reynolds swung her towards the narrow platform built high up near the roof. It was his nerve and swiftness which saved her as she reeled on the edge and the crowd beneath caught its breath in a moment's half painful, half delicious suspense.

"You're a bit excited," he said coolly. "You might have fallen."

"Yes—but for you, Geoff."

She was standing panting beside him, and her tone was vaguely apologetic. Down below Jim Reynolds was performing alone; but for once she did not seem to see him.

"It's Christmas Eve, Geoff," she said suddenly, with a little laugh. "Wot are you a-going to give me, boy?"

He started and looked down at her with a twisted smile on his painted face.

"I don't know—yet," he said.

His manner silenced her, and they stood wordless side by side. Jim had finished his turn, and was swinging carelessly backwards and forwards, bowing to the crowd beneath with the debonair ease and grace which was his best stock-in-trade. Then he

jumped on to the platform opposite, and the audience became silent with expectation. They knew that the great turn of the evening had come. There was a moment's effective pause before Jim swung the bar which he still held across the space to his partner, who caught it and held it. Suddenly the woman beside him touched him on the arm. The colour had faded from her face; she looked tired and ill.

"Geoff," she said, "I don't know what it is; I have such a strange feeling—a sort of fear. You'll see that nothing happens, Geoff?"

He laughed.

"To me?"

"Yes, of course, to you."

"That's all right; nothing'll happen to me," he said.

Their eyes met, and suddenly her jaw dropped. The terror of death stood in her eyes.

"Geoff!" she gasped.

But he had already gone. Clumsily but with an absolute self-confidence he had swung himself off the platform to Jim's side opposite. It was no part of the programme, and those who knew it wondered.

"Wot fool's game are you up to now?" Jim asked roughly.

Geoff looked at him and smiled. The crowd took the smile for a comic grimace and laughed.

"I wanted to tell you something," he said.

"Tell me something—now? Wot is it?"

"Just that I heard you last night—that's all."

The gay-coloured handkerchief dropped from Jim's fingers. His face had grown suddenly sallow.

"You! Geoff; you 'eard!"

"Yes; I thought it might interest you to know—before our last turn."

"Geoff!" His voice quavered and broke. He held out his hand as though to detain his partner, but without a word Geoff swung himself clear and out into the open space. The crowd drew its breath sharply; the band ceased its monotonous round of popular airs, and a hush of tense expectation fell on the eager audience. The Mayfordites were a respectable, churchgoing people, but there was enough of the old heathen in them to make a show in which a couple of fellow-creatures risked their necks for their amusement intensely absorbing. Forty feet above them Geoff swung carelessly to and fro. They saw that he was dusting his hands with powder, and for once he ceased to look comic in their eyes. Then suddenly, as though at a given signal, he fell backwards, his knees hooked over the bar, his arms stretched down over his head. In that moment he looked ludicrous enough, with the hair of his yellow wig hanging earthwards, his long coat-tails flying, his painted face flushed and swollen with the strain; but the crowd did not laugh. Possibly they were no longer looking at him, but at the man who was to spring from twenty feet above, and, turning in somersaults, be caught in mid-air by the waiting Hercules. There was no net. Savoni did not go in for nets. They cost money, and they took away the excitement.

The band struck a preparatory warning note. The man standing on the platform did not move. Only the woman opposite him could see the expression of his face; it was a livid face, like her own, with an abject, pitiful terror stamped on every feature. Beneath them the human pendulum swung backwards and forwards—waiting—waiting like some patient, inevitable destiny. The band repeated its impatient signal; the "boss" cracked his whip and the crowd stirred restlessly. Was it a joke, or had the man really lost his nerve?

"Hurry!" came the angry command from the "boss's" corner. "What are you waiting for? What's wrong?"

"I can't!" Reynolds whispered. "I can't."

No one heard him. Only the woman opposite saw that the sweat poured down his grey cheeks, that his lips hung and trembled like a child's. Her own face had undergone a change. The terror was mingled with a hard contempt, and there was a scornful line about her mouth.

"You must!" she said under her breath. He could not have heard her, but as though her imperious will roused him, he pulled himself upright.

"I can't!" he repeated in the same husky whisper. "Don't you see: he means to kill me—don't you see? Geoff, Geoff, it was only a joke——"

The crowd grew restless. The Mayfordites were respectable folk, but it is a physiological fact that respectable folk, when they come together, can become demons, bloodthirsty, implacable, and cruel. Only the

children laughed merrily at the agonised man above them, and their laughter rang like innocent music in the tense silence.

Jim Reynolds looked below him. He saw his enemy swinging 'backwards and forwards, a black, moving shadow against the light; he saw still lower the yellow blur of the ring; he saw himself lying crushed and bleeding in the sand, dead, or perhaps worse.

"I can't!" he repeated mechanically. "I can't!"

His voice choked in his throat. And then suddenly out of the haze which was gathering before his eyes he saw his enemy's face, flushed and distorted, and knew that whithersoever he went this man would track him down, would kill as surely as there is justice in heaven. And the knowledge bereft him of his senses. With a curse that was like a groan he sprang forward. He had taken no aim; his leap had been a mere wild plunge into space. A woman in the crowd screamed, and then for the breathless space of a second there was no sound, no movement. Even the children had grown silent. It was no more than a second—scarcely that—during which the doomed man rushed towards his destruction; but it seemed an eternity, a long drawn out eternity. And then what appeared a miracle happened. The man on the bar swung out and caught the falling body—caught it and held it. They heard his muscles crack, and for a moment it seemed as though the hooked knees were slipping from their grip and the fate of both men was sealed. But Carter held firm, and the band,

awakened from its stupor, played the triumphal chord. The great feat was accomplished.

Geoff Carter went on ahead into the "green-room," looking neither to the right nor left. Nell followed, with Reynolds stumbling at her side. He was shaking from head to foot and his lips were blue.

"'E knew," he repeated insistently. "'E knew, and I thought 'e meant to kill me."

Nell made no answer, but she shrank from him.

When they reached the green-room, Geoff had already drawn on his overcoat, and the yellow wig lay on the table. Nell took a wavering step towards him, her hand outstretched.

"Geoff!" she said humbly.

He shook his head. His face was almost classic in its serenity.

"That's all right, Nell; don't you say nothing. I know—and I meant to kill you; yes, the Lord forgive me, I meant to kill you both. But then, when it came to the scratch, I couldn't. Maybe I'm a namby-pamby sort, or maybe I cared too much, old girl. Or maybe"—his lips twitched—"maybe it was the faces of the kiddies. It seemed a dirty trick to take one's revenge in their tfeat—on Christmas Eve." He was silent a moment, and then he took a thick, much-worn pocket-book from his coat and laid it quietly on the table. "It's true—I was a bit of a stinger with you; but I didn't mean it. It was all for the home—for you. I didn't understand; I'm such a thickhead with the women. But I'd like to make up. I don't want it now; a chap like me can fend for himself. Take

the stuff, Nell. It's my Christmas gift, my—my wedding gift—and God bless you."

He was gone. The folds of the tent fell behind him, and they heard his slow, heavy step crunch through the snow. Nell took the pocket-book and thrust it in the bosom of her dress. There was a shawl lying on the table, and she threw it about her shoulders.

"Nell, where are you goin'?"

She turned upon the pitiable, broken figure standing in the shadow. Her hand held the canvas opening; there was a triumphant smile about her lips.

"I've been a mad, wicked fool," she said, "but I ain't mad no more. He's a man—more man than you. I'm proud of him, and if he'll have me, if he'll take me back, I'll stick to him through thick and thin. I swear it!" She pulled the canvas on one side and her voice rang clear in the winter stillness. "Geoff, Geoff, my dearest; wait for me! I'm coming with you!"